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Doing right for no profit earns praise

Donn Esmonde: People we can be proud of

By Donn Esmonde
News Columnist

Ordinary people do extraordinary things, for no other reasons than pride, dedication, commitment and concern. None of the actions of these folks was motivated by fame, fortune or — Lord knows — a burning desire to receive a year-end Esmonde Award.

The lightly coveted Esmo is annually given in acknowledgment of deeds done simply for the greater good. Recipients receive no plaque, no stipend, nothing other than recognition for stands taken on principle. They should be proud of themselves, because we are proud of them.

Michelle Stiles — The former UB basketball player, looking to help needy kids, signed on as unpaid assistant and mentor to the McKinley High girls basketball team. But she angered authoritarian principal Crystal Barton for questioning the actions of a male teacher/ coach. Barton fired Stiles, prevented players from speaking to the School Board on the volunteer's behalf and influenced the excessive suspension of player Jayvonna Kincannon.

Despite public outcry and the fault-finding of a \$25,000 investigation, Barton was not fired, suspended, transferred or demoted by Superintendent James Williams.

Stiles, sadly, is proof some stories have no happy ending. But in a larger universe, doing right is its own reward.

Malikah McNeal — Barack Obama's run for president inspired many folks to vote for the first time. It moved others to change their lives.

McNeal is one of what may be a legion who personally applied the "Yes We Can" slogan. The single mother of four, who takes two buses to her job at a home for troubled kids, registered for the nursing program at Trocaire College the day after first seeing Obama speak. So far, she is handling the heavy load of job, school and parent.

“[Obama] made me feel like I can achieve anything,” McNeal said. “There was no reason to stay in the situation I was in.”

Howard Zemsky — He is evidence that the term “enlightened developer” is not a contradiction in terms.

Zemsky — whose family owned Russer Foods — is the rare entrepreneur who understands that preservation is good economics. As board president, Zemsky guided the world-class Darwin Martin House restoration. As an investor/ developer, he defied skeptics in 2003 by converting the old Larkin warehouse on Exchange Street (visible from the I- 190) into a 10-story office building. He recently announced plans for a nearby \$10 million office/retail complex. Zemsky has the progressive sensibility our corporate boardrooms could use more of.

Randy Sargent — The killings of teenagers Devonte Murray and Alen Stepney, bystanders caught in a gang-war cross-fire, was the most senseless crime of 2007.

While the rest of us went on with our lives, Sargent put a halt to his. For days he stood on the corner near the shooting site, refusing to eat. His self-sacrifice kept the crime in the public eye and may have prompted eyewitnesses to come forward. Their testimony helped to make the case against Calvin McKoy, who last week was sentenced to 50 years to life.

Ann and Tom Tworzydlo — Call them soldiers for democracy.

The West Seneca senior citizens were among dozens of folks who hit the streets after Town Board members refused to let citizens vote on a board-downsizing proposal. The Tworzdydios joined civic leader Kevin Gaughan’s successful petition drive to put the downsizing question on the ballot, personally gathering more than 200 signatures.

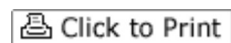
“It’s not like we live in Russia or China,” Tom Tworzydlo said. “We should have a say in our own government.”

Although the Town Board delayed the referendum in court, it may come to a spring vote. Folks like the Tworzdydios felt democracy was worth fighting for.

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