Sunday, July 4, 2004

Human and Civil Rights Awards

Saturday night's Annual NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards Dinner honored the contributions of individuals committed to justice for all people.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., MEMORIAL AWARD
Maynard Holbrook Jackson (deceased), Atlanta, Georgia
Maynard Holbrook Jackson's legacy embodies the next phase of the civil rights movement by moving the battle front closer to the realms of elected office and corporate boardrooms. His vision was only 35 when in 1973 he was elected Atlanta, Georgia's first Black mayor. He created Neighborhood Planning Units, which gave grassroots neighborhoods a voice in city politics. He tackled police brutality, created a nationally praised public arts program; and greatly expanded HANDSFIELD International Airport while making sure that affirmative action programs guaranteed minority participation.

Yet, if his heart was in his political actions, his soul was in being people to achieve. He founded the Maynard Jackson Youth Foundation to teach business skills to disadvantaged youth. He created a regional arts and humanities program for children and young adults and established the American League to increase national voter turnout and to encourage young people to get the vote.

His dynamic leadership ability to coalesce differing political, economic, and societal factions to focus on equality and opportunity for all has established his legacy as an architect of the "New South." When a bullet struck him last year, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin paid tribute by saying, "Never had I met someone so bold and brave to succeed. Maynard was fearless, courageous, and audacious—a lion of a man."

VIRGINIA URIBE AWARD FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP IN HUMAN RIGHTS
Kevin Jennings
New York, New York

Four out of five gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) high school students experience harassment at school, educators know we have a long way to go. But Kevin Jennings said in a day when "every child learns to value and respect all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity."

Jennings is co-founder and Executive Director of GLSEN, the Gay and Lesbian Straight Education Network, which provides support for over 2,000 high school-based clubs throughout the United States. Called Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), the clubs empower educators and students to end bullying and harassment through education. Jennings was the faculty advisor to the nation's first GSA, founded at the school where he taught, Harbor High School, Massachusetts.

In 1988, Jennings helped create a gay-friendly curriculum for schools; led GLSEN in its successful effort to make Massachusetts the first state to outlaw discrimination against public school students on the basis of sexual orientation; wrote and produced the award-winning documentary Out of the Past, and, in 1993, established a statewide network called "Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students."

In 2004, GLSEN launched its first effort and national network called "Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students."

"His Name-Calling Week," held in March and observed by over 4,000 educators in their classrooms. His Name-Calling Week was supported by 40 national education and youth service organizations.

GEORGE L. SÁNCHEZ MEMORIAL AWARD
Lupe Ramos-Montigny, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Born in Weslaco, Texas, Lupe Ramos-Montigny traveled as a girl to Weslaco to meet and cheer in Michigan and ramose raconteurship in a Michigan League to increase national voter turnout and to encourage young people to get the vote.

She was instrumental in the creation of Western Ethnic (WE), an organization that promotes racial balance and gender equity. She organized a classroom project to celebrate the contributions of local African American leaders to the Greater Grand Rapids Area. And she successfully persuaded the state of Michigan to name a day and a street after César Chávez.

A dedicated Association member, Ramos-Montigny has served as the first Hispanic president to serve the Michigan Education Association (MEA)/Region 9. An MEA Board Member, Ramos-Montigny attended the U.S. Congressional Hispanic Institute in Washington, D.C., where she helped set the national agenda, it pertains to Hispanics around the country.

At home, she was the organizing force behind the Michigan Democratic Hispanic/Latino Caucus, where she has served as chair for the past five years and saw the successful election of the first Hispanic member of the Michigan House of Representatives in 2003. She became co-chair of the Michigan Democratic Party.

ELLISON S. OXENDALE MEMORIAL AWARD
Rev. Michael Yoshii, Alameda, California

A clergyman in the manner of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Michael Yoshii embodies religion with social activities. He rolls up his sleeves and fights for justice, particularly as it affects Alamedas growing Asian community.

A third-generation Japanese American, Rev. Yoshii has spoken out on a number of issues, such as housing for the poor, racial diversity, and civil liberties violations. Stressing the importance of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds getting to know each other, he initiated discussion forums among Alamedas politicians, business people, and city residents.

He was also instrumental in establishing the Alamedas Multi-Cultural Community Center, which serves as a hub for the activities for Alamedas many ethnic cultures. Several years ago, Rev. Yoshii also helped to establish a Community Board of the Alameda School District and the Alameda Board of Education to conduct a diversity audit, which led to new hiring targets that increase diversity among the districts workforce. Rev. Yoshii also helped to establish the Organization of Alamedas Asians (OAA), which promotes voter registration drives and forums for the Alameda community. He was the convener for the Coalition of Alamedans for Racial Equality (CARE), a community response to racial controversy with the Alameda Police Department. CARE has evolved into a multicultural training program for students to address issues surrounding identity, culture, and racism. Through the Buma Vire Community Institute, Youth projects serving student achievement have been developed under his guidance.

Rev. Yoshii has forged new opportunities for multicultural relationships in a city undergoing rapid demographic changes. His message: "If we're going to live together, we have to learn to respect each other and appreciate our differences so that we can create a world better together."