

Eleven Honored as Belknap County Champions for Children and Families



(L-R) Karen Thurston, Peggy Selig, Bob Selig, Carol Pierce, Armand Maheux, Rasim Gusinac, Umija Gusinac, Jim Fortier, Arlene Fortier, Joan Cormier, and Barbara Belmont.

LACONIA: Eleven residents of Belknap County were recently honored as Champions for Children and Families at the January “Soup-A-Bowl” Convocation for Children and Families held at the Winnepesaukee Expo Center in Lakeport. These awards recognize the unique and varied contributions made by county residents on behalf of children and families in Belknap County. They were presented by the Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families, one of the 14 sponsors of this annual Convocation event. Receiving awards were Laconia residents Barbara Belmont, Joan Cormier, Jim and Arlene Fortier, Armand Maheux, Carol Pierce, Bob Selig, Peggy Selig and Gilford residents, Rasim and Umija Gusinac and Karen Thurston.

Barbara Belmont is the Victim Witness Coordinator for Belknap County and in this role has been the primary motivator and organizer of the new Greater Lakes Child Advocacy Center. A collaborative initiative, this new center that is located at the Family Center on Rt. 106 in Laconia, is a site where child abuse investigations can be conducted in a safe, sensitive, and coordinated manner. Barbara has spent more than 10 years on this project and according to Belknap County Attorney Lauren Noether she “is respected for her thoughtful approaches to resolving problems and is an exceedingly positive role model in our community.”

Joan Cormier has been connected with the Lakes Region Scholarship Foundation for the past 37 years. Starting as the volunteer Corresponding Secretary in 1968, she became the Executive Director in *Belknap County Champions for Children and Families*

1985. Throughout this entire time she has helped thousands of students continue their education, attracting more than 430 donors who support the work of the Foundation. Says Karen Bianco, Board President, “Joan *is* the voice of the (Foundation). Hers is a voice that has been – and continues to be – heard and respected by students, families and donors alike.”

Jim and Arlene Fortier have a lifetime of service to youth and families, even as busy parents of their own six children. They have managed the concession stand and revenue from all P.A.C.T. (Parents and Children Together) dances and indicate they have worked “at 105 out of a possible 107 dances!” Jim owns an auto repair shop in Laconia and Arlene is an employee of the Lakes Region Child Care Centers, yet they are still able to prioritize community service in their lives. According to Jim Carroll, “The Fortiers are literally the ‘go-to’ folks for reliability and consistency. Their lives are models of community service and always for the betterment of youth of the region.”

Armand Maheux is busy and active as a volunteer with the Belknap County Restorative Justice Program, the D.A.R.E. Program, the Teen Center, P.A.C.T., and as a Laconia Police Commissioner. Says Brian Loanes, Director of the Restorative Justice Program, “Armand volunteers without any fanfare. He does so, not looking or expecting any recognition. He is willing to travel to any community to help.” Fondly called “Pepe”, Armand was labeled the mascot for the Belmont High School girls’ basketball team when his granddaughter, Tasha, was a team member.

Carol Pierce is the Chair of the Laconia Human Relations Committee and has for years, both in her professional and personal life, been an advocate for those marginalized in society. She served in the NH Legislature and as Chair of the first NH Commission on the Status of Women. While working nationally and internationally as an organizational development consultant, she still made time to assist local non-profits. Carol is a founding member of the Laconia Human Relations Committee and has become the organizing force behind Multicultural Market Day, held annually in Laconia and attracting thousands of visitors each year. Carol’s friends and colleagues appreciate her calm manner. According to her friend Anne Jacobsen, “Carol demonstrates the highest degree of cultural sensitivity and respect for people. Her work is quiet and in most ways unseen, but nonetheless significant.”

Friends of Bob Selig credit him as the primary organizer behind the recent renovation of the Laconia Library. His vision and persistence is credited for making this project a reality. Bob led the multi-year effort, building consensus within numerous sectors for this project and doing everything he could to communicate the rich potential of this refurbished facility for Laconia and the Lakes Region. According to retired Laconia businessman Leo Sanfacon, “Nothing deterred Bob. The task of getting political and taxpayer support and the necessary money would have daunted most people.”

Peggy Selig, as the long-time Director of the Laconia Adult Education Program, has built this program by facilitating partnerships with agencies in the county and state, listening to the needs of citizens, and encouraging volunteerism. A skilled manager, she consistently and enthusiastically encourages many youth and adults to complete their education. Her sister-in-law Joyce Selig notes, “If you have ever attended one of the Laconia Academy graduations, you will be moved by the warmth that flows from Peggy to her graduates and the reciprocation of those feelings from the students and their families.” Peggy is an active volunteer with LRGHealthcare, the Center for Civic Engagement, Lakes Region Community Services Council, and the Laconia School Building Committee.

Rasim and Umija Gusinac are political refugees from Bosnia who came to Laconia in 2000 from war-torn Bosnia. Although they are both trained school teachers and are fluent in several languages, they did not speak a word of English when they arrived. This resilient couple realized that the fastest way for them to assimilate was to be active volunteers for community causes. Both are now involved in assisting other members of the diverse immigrant and refugee communities that are resettling in the Lakes Region. They act as interpreters, advocates, educators, and supporters for those who need help finding employment, accessing healthcare, and traversing the law enforcement, judicial, and court systems. According to mentor Carol Pierce, “They both see themselves as important role models for how one lives wisely and with gusto in a democratic society that represents freedom of the spirit and soul.”

Karen Thurston is a tireless advocate for children who have mental illness, and their families. Her involvement spans many years and includes a wide variety of activities with children and parents. She has also volunteered with the Parent Information Center, the Belknap County Juvenile Fire Setter Intervention Team, and Enhanced Life Options for people with disabilities. She is the founder and current president of Blue Star Mothers of NH, a support organization for mothers of children serving in the military. Michael Coughlin, Executive Director of Genesis Behavioral Health says, “Her emphasis on networking...provides her with a vast knowledge of available resources. She doesn’t just show up at meetings to speak for parents – she provides them with the skills they need to be independent advocates for their own children.”

“The work and spirit of these people is what makes communities healthy and vibrant and we are delighted to honor their accomplishments,” says Susan Smith, Chair of the Belknap County Citizens Council. “Citizens can really make such a difference in their communities!”