

Community & People

Local peacemakers honored with awards in Columbia Heights

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An individual, a business and the Columbia Heights Police Department have been awarded the second annual City of Peace Awards.

The awards were presented during the 16th annual Columbia Heights Prayer Breakfast on May 6 at Murzyn Hall.

Mayor Gary Peterson aspired to bring back the feeling of peace to Columbia Heights after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. With assistance from Sal Di Leo, a marketing consultant, they created a movement for peace in Columbia Heights that would span several years.

Three monuments of peace have been funded and installed in the city, including the Clock Tower at 40th and Central Avenues in 2006; the bronze statue “Always on Guard” in front of the public safety building on 41st Avenue in 2009; and most recently the Heritage Tower in the roundabout at Jefferson Street and Huset Parkway in May 2013. The success of the monuments is in large part due to the monetary donations from citizens and community members of Columbia Heights.

“We really want to celebrate peace and diversity in our community, so we decided to give out a few City of Peace Awards,” Peterson said during the awards presentation.

Di Leo said the awards were founded on the premise that “everybody has a story,” adding that it’s easy to destroy, break and tear down things.

“Peace takes work,” he said. “Peace takes desire because it’s fragile, but it has to be worked at.”

The awards were established to create a legacy of peace that will not include building additional monuments.

Award criteria includes:

- Commitment to encouraging peace in the community;

- Communications skills of promoting the importance of peace in the community;
- Commitment to Ethical Human Resource Practices in the work place in the community to create more opportunities to live better and in peace in the community;
- Commitment to helping provide educational resources to enhance better employment opportunities for all people in the community; and
- Commitment to encourage all people of all faiths to practice their religious beliefs in peace in the community.

The Selection Committee voted on and chose this year's winners.

V.J. Smith

Selection Committee members Sal Di Leo and Willie Fort assisted Mayor Gary Peterson in presenting V.J. Smith with a City of Peace Award on May 6. (Sun Focus photo by Kassie Petermann)

V.J. Smith is the winner of the individual category. He leads the Minneapolis Chapter of MAD DADS (Men Against Destruction, Defending Against Drugs and Social-disorder) with the help of other organizations committed to mentoring at-risk youth on the streets. He has a passion to see the lives of young people who are heading in the wrong direction turn around through the work of MAD DADS and its volunteers. He urges youth to give up drugs and guns, to get jobs, stay in school and respect themselves and their communities.

Di Leo described Smith as a peacemaker who runs an organization that reaches out in times of trouble and distress.

Holy Land

Holy Land, a restaurant, grocery store and bakery on Central Avenue in Northeast Minneapolis, received the City of Peace Award in the business category. Di Leo said Holy Land is a company that encourages and empowers peace in the community by hiring employees of all different cultures.

The award was accepted on Holy Land's behalf by Mohamed Idris, who served on the City of Peace Awards Selection Committee.

Columbia Heights Police Department

Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau and V.J. Smith proudly display their plaques on May 6. Nadeau accepted the City of Peace Award on behalf of the Columbia Heights Police Department. (Sun Focus photo by Kassie Petermann)

Police Chief Scott Nadeau accepted the City of Peace Award on behalf of the Columbia Heights Police Department, the winner of the organization category.

“I couldn’t be more proud of giving this to Chief Nadeau and to his police department,” Mayor Peterson said.

“Especially in the United States now, the police departments are going through a real tough time,” he said. “I hope that everyone here supports our police men and women because this is a tough job.”

Nadeau said, “I’m really humbled on behalf of the police department to receive this award.”

The police department was nominated by the Columbia Heights School District. Officers have an active partnership with the community. They work toward peace through education, and they are very involved in the community. A few highlights include recently hiring two officers from Ethiopia and Somalia; hosting an annual community picnic in partnership with the school district, fire department, public works, community development, parks and recreation, and the library; hosting community events such as Neighborhood Watch, Senior Academy, Teen Academy, National Night Out, and Coffee with a Cop; and participation in youth outreach activities such as Open Gym, the Anti-Bullying program, Youth Safety Camp, and the Big Brother and Big Sister mentoring program.

“It’s an absolutely wonderful relationship,” Nadeau said. “We wouldn’t be able to do half of the things we’d want to do without the amazing support that we have from this community.”

Each award winner received a plaque, a City of Peace polo shirt, and a \$200 check.

In 2013, the first City of Peace Award was presented to Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH), which is Spanish for “our little brothers and sisters.” This nonprofit corporation

provides orphaned, abandoned and disadvantaged children with homes, healthcare and educational programs.

Next year's City of Peace Awards will be presented during a standalone banquet and ceremony in September 2016. City of Peace Scholarships will be awarded during the event to three students in Columbia Heights who write a winning essay on "the importance of peace and how to go about implementing it in our community."

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