

Fab 5 Awards Recognize Hard Work

By Bill Chaisson | Posted: Wednesday, February 24, 2016 6:00 am

The Fab 5 awards ceremony will be held at Coltivare, 235 S. Cayuga St., on Monday, Feb. 29 from 5:30 to 9 p.m.

Larger cities like Rochester and Syracuse have “40under40” awards for their business communities. Ithaca is a smaller place, but as Tompkins Trust Company CEO Greg Hartz said, “There was a real sense that we had some great young professionals in this community. This is a special place, and it takes community leaders to make it that way.” And so the Fab 5 Awards were born. Tompkins Trust sponsored the awards and the chamber collected the nominations in five categories.

Tompkins Connect, a local organization for young professionals, grew out of Ithaca Forward when the United Way and the Ithaca/Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce signed a memorandum of understanding that funded the group. Several members of this group fostered the idea of the awards and presented it to Tompkins Trust. “They made this possible,” said Ryan McCune, the membership services and program manager at the chamber of commerce.

While the Fab 5 Awards are not on the grand scale of “40under40” in other cities, the Ithaca recognition will be accorded for five specific categories, rather than plucking 40 folks at random from the business community. The categories are best entrepreneur, best business leader, best not-for-profit leader, best volunteer, and rookie of the year.

Rookie of the Year

When Ducson Nguyen moved in here in 2009 he didn’t think that he would be pursuing elective office, certainly not only six years into his tenure here, but in November he found himself as the top vote getter for the race to be alderperson for the Second Ward. Describing himself as an “introverted software programmer,” Nguyen became more interested in government after being introduced to Alderperson Seph Murtagh (D-2nd) and Mayor Svante Myrick at a Tompkins Connect meeting. They did not seem like “obvious political types” to him in that neither had a background in political science or the law.

Nguyen is from New Jersey, across the river from Philadelphia and has an engineering degree from Rutgers

University. He moved to Ithaca as a trailing spouse—his wife teaches psychology at Tompkins Cortland Community College—and found a job at Grammatech, a software company that does “innovative security research.” Raised in the suburbs, he loves living in downtown Ithaca.

Since his election to the Common Council in November Nguyen has been on a learning curve. “It’s really fascinating,” he said. “There are more meetings than I anticipated, talking to people at non-profits and members of the public reaching out, but it has been a lot of fun and a lot of reading.”

Nguyen is an advocate for the construction of more housing downtown. He, for example, was a supporter of the proposed “Triangle building” and will also work to change waterfront zoning from industrial to mixed-use. “I would like to get away from building on large lots,” he said. “I prefer a more urban style with retail on the ground floor and more on-demand manufacturing.”

Business Leader of the Year

Robert Lawlis is the executive director of the Cayuga Area Plan/Preferred and the Cayuga Area Physicians’ Alliance (CAPa). CAPa partners with Cayuga Medical Center to own and manage the Cayuga Area Plan, Inc. and Cayuga Area Preferred, Inc. In other words, Lawlis manages the business side of health care in this region.

He does not, however, have a business or medical background. He has an undergraduate degree in mathematics from University of Maine, Orono and his master’s degree in systems engineering from Cornell. He began working at Cayuga Medical Center four years ago and has been director of CAP since 2013.

His job is to design systems and processes that allow medical services and information to flow through the regional network of health-care providers as efficiently as possible.

Lawlis characterized the physicians’ alliance as a lot of different, independent organizations, large and small, trying to be a health network. “We are the glue,” he said. “We’re a necessary bureaucracy.”

The alliance serves as a governance mechanism and includes a number of governance committees staffed by physicians. Lawlis works with the chairs of all the committees.

“I do a lot of analytics,” he said, “but I’m also the chief oiler of the operation.” He noted that the doctors are competitors, but the alliance requires them to be collaborators.

Going forward Lawlis will be integrating other health-care providers, like psychologists and physical therapists, into the alliance. At this point this doesn't include non-allelopathic practitioners like chiropractors, but said Lawlis, "Things are changing every year."

Volunteer of the Year

Emily Carroll has been in private practice as a massage therapist since 2003, and she began working with clients at Hospicare the following year.

"One of my former instructors at the Finger Lakes School of Massage told me they were looking for volunteers," she said. "During school we had worked with seniors. Generally you use lighter pressure and, if they're ill, you have to be more creative with positioning them to make sure they are comfortable."

Working with hospice patients can be "very intense emotionally," she said, especially when she meets family members in their home. There are also special considerations regarding the patients.

"I have to be very alert with my communication cues from non-verbal people," Carroll said. "I have to listen to the patient's body for things like breathing changes."

Carroll said her volunteer work is not a large time commitment, but her home visits mean that "family members can take a break." She sees some patients for a month and a half and others for six months.

"It's not uncommon for the imminently dying to pull away from touch," she said. "They have one foot in the other world, and when I get that cue, it's time to stop."

Non-profit Leader of the Year

David Shapiro is the president of Family & Children's Services, which he describes as "the largest mental health outpatient clinic in town. We're a voice for those without a voice."

Shapiro said that the county mental health clinic serves people with more persistent problems and with a larger medical component. Family & Children's is the county's largest provider of services to children, but Ithaca College and Cornell students faculty are also referred to them.

"It's unique to have a clinic of our size," he said, "that serves so many demographics." Part of Shapiro's job is to be out in the community, speaking with his colleagues in other non-profits and government officials.

"When I see pockets of people who aren't represented, then I wonder why," he said. "Do we not have the right kind of outreach?" Right now he is working on expanding service to children in rural towns who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties, to homeless children, and he wants to expand his clinic's presence at GIAC. He noticed a need at GIAC because his own children attend the programs there.

Shapiro has been in Ithaca for five years, arriving here from New York City where he was running homeless shelters. He has his master's degree in public administration from Baruch College in Manhattan.

Challenges ahead include drug treatment. He sees a problem with the separation of mental health and drug treatment funding. "I don't think we're funded enough," he said, "and they're funded less."

