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News

Alfano Honors 2008's 'Women of Distinction'

A standing room only crowd at the Stewart Manor Country Club was the scene for Assemblyman Tom Alfano's sixth annual "Women of Distinction Awards." The ceremony, expanded to include all communities in the 21st Assembly district, honored women for their professional, community and leadership roles. Alfano started the program six years ago to thank women for what he called "their selfless contributions in making our communities and state a better place." Alfano's keynote speakers for the event was Schneider Hospital Doctor Deborah Esernio Jossen and Citibank's Community Affairs Coordinator Michelle DeBenedetto.



The 2008 "Women of Distinction."

The program began with Franklin Square resident and NYPD Police Officer Randi LoCicero and Jacqueline Alfano leading the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance. Thereafter, Gabriella Sam wowed the crowd with a patriotic rendition of The Star-Spangle Banner. Carla Cohen, publisher of the Gateway Bulletin Newspapers, introduced dignitaries and shared some thoughts on the occasion.

Awards emcee Sandra Smith said, "Today's ceremony highlights the unique and lasting contributions our honorees have made in our community. These awards recognize the continued service, professional development and commitment to the greater community of our honorees. For far too long, the contributions of

women in society were often overlooked and underappreciated. This awards ceremony is just a small step in recognizing and celebrating the role women play in today's global economy and developing neighborhood."

Tama Johnson, a former recipient of the "Women of Distinction" honor, said "Assemblyman Alfano stands for many things. Social justice and opportunity for women being his hallmarks."

Alfano centered his remarks on the constantly changing roles women play in day-to-day life. "The women we honor here today are role models for our children and young adults. They work hard, they volunteer, they contribute and improve our quality of life." The assemblyman also spoke about the awards and that the ceremony marked a new expanded program, stating, "Today we have honorees from every corner of the 21st Assembly District. This crowd comes from all areas and backgrounds. Today we say thank you and encourage everyone to do a little more for the community and strive to be the best in all we do."

The evening's entertainment started with Floral Park Memorial High School's choir singing two touching pieces a cappella to a moved audience. The students' range of performance rivaled that of professional singing artists.

The guest speaker at the awards was Dr. Deborah Esernio-Jenssen who wowed audience members with an outstanding discussion on "how far women have come." She used illustrations of statistics and stories to make her points. Dr. Esernio-Jenssen related a story about her work as a doctor and talked about still-lingering stereotypes about women in the workplace. Jenssen used the catch phrase "we've come a long way baby" to illustrate her points.

The awards section of the program started with five specialty honors named after Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Educator Emma Willard, Suffragist Susan B. Anthony, Ambassador Eleanor Roosevelt and Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Assemblyman Alfano presented each of the honors with special guest presenters. Dr. Maria Palandra presented the Sandra Day O'Connor award to Floral Park Bellerose Supt. Dr. Lynn Pombonyo. John Street School Principal Ceil Candreva presented the Emma Willard Award to Franklin Square educator AnnMarie Giarrizzo. Norma DeBartolo presented the Eleanor Roosevelt Award to Floral Park Memorial Principal Kathy Sottile. Judy VanHaaren presented the Susan B. Anthony Award to West Hempstead resident Pam Margaroli. Amy Buchanan presented the Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick Award to Elmont resident and anti-gun violence advocate Leslyn Stewart.

Eleanor Roosevelt Award winner Kathy Sottile thanked her staff for being an outstanding team and being the foundation for Floral Park's success. Sandra Day O'Connor Award winner Dr. Lynn Pombonyo dedicated her award to the children of Floral Park and all those who contribute so greatly to the community and her outstanding board. AnnMarie Giarrizzo talked of her love of her work with children and the support of her family in all her endeavors. Pam Margaroli talked of the team effort it takes to make things happen.

In a very moving moment at the awards, Leslyn Stewart talked of the sacrifice of losing her husband, NYPD Detective Dillon Stewart to gun violence. While holding her daughter she talked about making our community a better place and the great support she receives from the survivors group and fellow police officers. NYPD Chief James Secreto was in attendance at Stewart's table and cheered Stewart on during her remarks.

In between the awards, a standing ovation for the singing performance of Italian opera singer Simona Rodano erupted from the crowd. Rodano has performed throughout Europe and on Broadway. Rodano's performance was a mixture of Italian opera and musical pieces from Broadway that moved audience members to a standing ovation at the conclusion of her performance.

During the awards program, a special presentation was made to the Elmont Memorial High School Girl's Varsity Basketball team for its advocacy of children and being a mainstay in mentoring and nurturing young people in the community. The team's leadership and resiliency in facing tragedy has been a life lesson for many. They were saluted not only for their work on the basketball court, but in the classroom and greater community. Principal John Capozzi said it best when he remarked, "These young ladies are like a family and are our best." The honorees were: Laura Rivera, Theresa Jones, Bianca Jean, Toni Ann Lawrence, Mystique Rivera, Abogo Kalu, Cherisse Benjamin, Jasmine Cobbs, Ayana Duncanson, Reauna Dorner, Jasmine Varughese and Carossa McAllister.

Before the awards were presented, special guest State Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos offered some remarks to all assembled. "This is a great evening where we honor you. All of you are the ones who make a difference in our neighborhoods. The nurses, doctors, teachers, PTA, civic activists are the ones who make our community strong. Assemblyman Alfano and I are so honored to be able to just say thank you for all you do."

The "Women of Distinction Honor" awards were presented to JJ's dance studio owner Janet Greene, New York State Nurses

Association Coordinator Jacqueline Grant, Nurse and Education Trustee Laura Ferone, civic activists Rosaleen Shea, anesthesiologist Dr. Vilma Joseph-Turner, child advocate and teacher Tohny Williams-Marsh, writer and CUNY student Sophia Vilceus, community activist Charlotte Orlando, Ladies Auxiliary president and St. Catherine's volunteer Paula Malloy, Guyanese community activist Savitri Naraidu, businesswoman and PTA leader Nicole Alexander, counselor and activist Kathy Dunne, PTA leader AnnMarie Disibio, PTA leader and cancer fundraiser Patti Gianasco, child advocate Francina Roman, PTA leader and community activist Tina Castelluzzo, South Floral Park Village Administrator Sally Ponce, bio-medical research student Patrice Pryce, community activist and student leader Julie DellaCorte.

Presenting the awards to the honorees were Assemblyman Alfano, MC Sandra Smith and state Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos. During the presentations, biographies were read on each of the honorees highlighting their work in the professions, community and making our community and state a better place to live.

The program ended with two outstanding performances by Aliya Dorner who sang Hero and the Elmont Memorial High School Jazz Choir. The young men and women from the group dazzled those assembled with two numbers complete with solos.



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