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Riverside NAACP Freedom Fund honors 16



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By DAVID OLSON
The Press-Enterprise

Manasseh Nwaigwe Jr. has quietly met with dozens of ministers and imams about fighting AIDS in the black community. Dina Stallings inspired countless debate students at Riverside City College, pushing them to be their best.

The two are among the 16 winners of the 2008 Freedom Fund awards, which will be handed out tonight by the Riverside chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Riverside NAACP's 58th annual dinner, which raises money for scholarships, is at the Riverside Convention Center.

Waudieur Rucker-Hughes, president of the chapter, said the award honors people who have worked selflessly to help others help themselves.

"We were looking for people who didn't give a heck about a thank you," she said "There are so many people who have given their time and talent."

The Riverside chapter covers all but the southwestern part of Riverside County.

Nwaigwe began the African Descent AIDS Mobilization project within the Riverside County Department of Public Health in 2005.

The county had previously had AIDS outreach in the black community, but nothing culturally specific, said Nwaigwe, a senior communicable disease specialist with the county.

"I really wanted to emphasize a culturally competent program that looks like you, talks like you and has the same values -- a program that represents you," he said.

AIDS continues to affect blacks disproportionately. In Riverside County, 9 percent of people living with AIDS at the end of 2007 were black. Only 6 percent of the county's population is black, according to U.S. census estimates.

Nwaigwe said he began meeting with ministers and imams before the project began. Churches and mosques have long played a key role in the black community, and reaching out to clergy was critical, he

said.

Some clergy responded by holding food and clothing drives for people with AIDS. Others went further, opening up their offices as HIV testing sites or, in one case, devoting an entire worship service to discussion of AIDS.

Nwaigwe and other ADAM outreach workers have also visited neighborhoods and apartment complexes with large black populations, handing out educational pamphlets and offering HIV testing.

Victoria Jauregui Burns, chief of the county's HIV program said Nwaigwe is effective in part because of his knack for making people comfortable with him.

"His passion comes through," Jauregui Burns said. "You get excited because he's excited."

Dina Stallings taught forensics at Riverside City College from the mid-1960s until her retirement in 1986. She also coached the forensics team and is still involved with Friends of RCC Forensics, which helps students from elementary school through community college improve communication skills.

Riverside criminal-defense attorney Virginia Blumenthal said Stallings is the reason she is a lawyer.

Blumenthal entered Riverside City College more than 40 years ago as a math major. She took a speech class with Stallings, who recruited her to the forensics team.

"She created the atmosphere in which you wanted to be the best that you can be," said Blumenthal, who sits on the Riverside Community College District Board of Trustees. "She made you want to win, not just for yourself, but for the team, and she was the leader of the team."

Stallings, who also taught English literature, history and political science at the college, said she saw her students as an extension of her family. She held many practice sessions in her Corona home, cooking dinner and preparing hot chocolate for them.

"I had them working hard," Stallings said, recalling practice sessions that sometimes lasted seven hours. "But they wanted to work hard. I loved them all."

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2008 RIVERSIDE NAACP FREEDOM FUND HONOREES

Community Activist Award

Ricki McManis

Youth Award

Memorie Samuel

Corporate Award

Bill Brown

Small Business Award

Rose Girard

Military Award

Staff Sgt. Earl Tynes

Law Enforcement Award

Palm Springs Police Chief David Dominguez

Justice Award

Superior Court Judge Irma Poole Asbery

Education Award

Kristi Woods

Political Award

Supervisor Bob Buster

Religion Award

Rev. Ron Gibson

Public Health Award

Manasseh Nwaigwe

Medical Award

Dr. Ernest Levister

Media & Journalism Award

Mary Shelton

Entrepreneurial Award

Willie Barteo

Omar Stratton Award

Dina Stallings

Roy Wilkins Award

Cindy Roth