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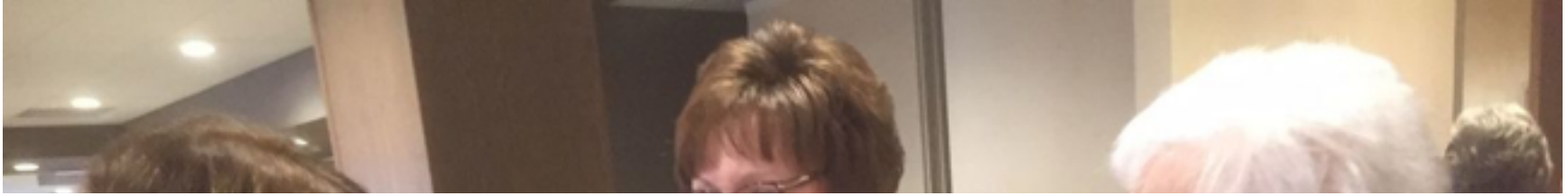
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WKU's Clark-Heard takes Woman of the Year award

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com Mar 24, 2018



Fittingly, a highly successful leader of young women was honored as Woman of the Year at Saturday's 26th annual Women of Achievement Awards Luncheon at Mariah's Restaurant.

Michelle Clark-Heard, who has guided the Western Kentucky University women's basketball team to four NCAA Tournament appearances and won two conference coach of the year awards in her six seasons as Lady Topper coach, was selected for the award from a group of 17 honorees.

A Louisville native who played basketball at WKU from 1987 through 1990, Heard is in a profession defined by victory and defeat. But she didn't see Saturday's honor as a victory for her.

"It was an amazing group of nominees, and any one of them could be recognized as Woman of the Year," said the coach, who missed Saturday's event because of a conflict with her work. "Everyone is a winner."

Heard did embrace the idea of being an example to others, a concept that is at the core of the Women of Achievement Awards event sponsored by the Bowling Green Human Rights Commission.

"When you get awards, it's about who you surround yourself with," Heard said in a phone interview. "I've been fortunate to have amazing people in my life. My mom is my role model. Now I try to be a role model and mentor to others."

Saturday's group of honorees included many role models, including 95-year-old Harriet Downing, the widow of former WKU President Dero Downing.

Downing, who attended the event with her children, said: “I’m very honored and a little bit embarrassed. As I look around at these ladies who have accomplished so much, I’m honored to be among them.”

In addition to Heard and Downing, Saturday’s honorees included:

- Jeanie Adams-Smith, an award-winning photojournalist who is now a professor at WKU.
- Josclynn Brandon, a member of the WKU Greek Hall of Fame who is now coordinator for leadership and volunteerism at WKU.
- Rita Daniels, a former legal secretary who has fashioned a distinguished career as a teacher and school administrator and is currently assistant principal at Warren Central High School.
- April Fulcher, who works to protect the rights of vulnerable crime victims through her role as victim advocate for the Bowling Green Police Department.
- Melissa Grimes, manager of the Kentucky Health Benefits Exchange through Community Action of Southern Kentucky and a board member at Barren River Area Safe Space.
- Lynne Holland, dean of students and chief diversity officer at WKU and a member of the Human Rights Commission board of directors.
- Tonya D. Johnson, an executive at the General Motors Corvette Assembly plant who has done considerable volunteer work in youth ministry and for the American Cancer Society.
- Jennifer Kash, a former instructional assistant at Briarwood Elementary School who continues to be an advocate for refugees through Bowling Green’s International Center.
- Lolita Martin, who has helped many local residents during her 21 years on the staff of the Housing Authority of Bowling Green.
- Mary Ellen Miller, a longtime English professor at WKU who co-founded the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies at the university.
- Patricia Minter, a history professor at WKU who has served on the university’s board of regents and is now a candidate for the District 20 seat in the Kentucky House of Representatives.
- Destiny O’Rourke, who worked in the office of former WKU President Gary Ransdell and is now college and career readiness coach at Bowling Green High School.
- Anne Padilla, a longtime English teacher at BGHS who was inducted into the Kentucky Teacher Hall of Fame in 2013.
- Sandra K. Young, who retired in 2013 after 33 years with the Bowling Green Parks and Recreation Department and has earned the American Red Cross Lifesaving Award of Merit.
- The late Ersa Whitlow Austin, who taught for 30 years in Warren County elementary schools and was recognized with a Jefferson Award for her community service.



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Human Rights Commission Executive Director Alice Waddell said it's more important than ever to hold up such women as role models in an age when more attention is being brought to sexual assault and harassment.

"Right now it's really important," Waddell said. "Women are often overlooked in the workplace. We shoulder a lot of responsibility as women, and it's important to recognize all that they do."

Although she wasn't among the 17 honorees Saturday, longtime Human Rights Commission treasurer Nancy Becker was honored for her years of service. Commission chairperson Wathetta Buford presented Becker with a quilt bearing pictures of Becker and commission staff and board members.

"That's beautiful," Becker said as she accepted the quilt. "I had no idea they were doing that. They're such a good bunch of folks. This means a lot to me."

Becker said the Women of Achievement Awards program is important because it is the largest fundraiser for the Human Rights Commission, which also receives funding from the city of Bowling Green and Warren County Fiscal Court.

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