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TOP STORY

Baker named South Central Kentuckian of the Year

JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com 10 min ago



Community members gathered Thursday at the Knicely Conference Center to pay tribute to a philanthropist whose impact has been felt throughout the Bowling Green area.

The Community Foundation of South Central Kentucky named the late Jerry E. Baker the 2018 South Central Kentuckian of the Year.

Jennifer Wethington, executive director of the Community Foundation, described Baker, a founding member of the Community Foundation who is perhaps best known for establishing the Baker Arboretum.

“The purpose of this award is to honor ordinary people in our community who are making significant contributions through their life's work,” Wethington said. “We want to celebrate these people who make giving back their priority for themselves, their family and their businesses and I think we have a great example of that today in Jerry E. Baker.”

According to a release from the Community Foundation, Baker, who died June 22, supported Western Kentucky University, the Med Center Health Community Clinic, Orchestra Kentucky, the Phoenix Theatre and the Boys & Girls Club of Bowling Green.

Bob Hilliard and Keith Carwell, two of the Jerry E. Baker Foundation's three trustees, accepted the award on Baker's behalf.

Carwell, who was Baker's attorney for decades, said Baker would have been happy to receive the award, although he was not known for seeking recognition for his philanthropic efforts.

“Jerry never did anything for which he wanted recognition, but he would be proud,” he said.

WKU Provost David Lee described Baker as “a very good choice” for the recognition.

“Jerry was not only a very generous man, he was a man with a very clear vision of exciting possibilities,” he said. “He knew how to marry resources to a vision.”

Lee called particular attention to Baker endowing the university with a professorship for a conductor of the WKU Symphony Orchestra and mentioning Baker’s interest in contributing to the arts.

“He has particularly strengthened our art programs,” he said.

Romanza Johnson, who was named South Central Kentuckian of the Year in 2013, also said Baker was a good choice for the award.

“Certainly he's most deserving,” she said. “I wish we had given it to him when he was still living.”



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Johnson said Baker cared deeply about the Bowling Green area and was particularly interested in promoting the arts.

“He loved our community and was so sharing," she said.

Johnson said Baker receiving the award means he and his contributions to the community are still appreciated.

“It shows that the community cares because he cared enough to share what he had with the community,” she said.

Wethington also announced that the Community Foundation had recently received an offer of a \$250,000 match from a local nonprofit. She didn’t name the group onstage, but she later told the Daily News that the Laura Goad Turner Charitable Foundation would match funds raised by the Community Foundation up to \$250,000.

Wethington said the Community Foundation would use the funding to sustain itself, rather than depending on gifts as it has in the past. With the funding, the foundation could potentially expand its operations to include other services such as a community needs assessment.

“What this would allow us to do is expand in some other areas where we would actually invest in other nonprofits,” she said.

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