

Bouldin, Quapaw honored at Crystal Ball

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Delta native Dr. Mary Ellen Stribling Bouldin was named as Honoree of the Year and the local Quapaw Canoe Company was named Business of the Year at the 12th annual Crystal Ball held Jan. 21. The ceremony also honored man of the year Dr. Michael Minor of Coldwater, woman of the year Brenda Luther of Holly Springs and non-profit of the year, Teach for America.

The ball, an annual event hosted by the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, honors businesses and individuals who serve the community while raising money for charity through a silent and live auction as well as through ticket sales. The theme of this year's ceremony was May the Force Be With Us, and the ceremony included dozens of men and women dressed as Star Wars characters.

Born in Sherard during the Great Depression, Bouldin, (or Mel, to her friends) rose to the top of her class at Clarksdale High School and she was the only woman in her class at the University of Tennessee medical school. When she graduated in 1960, she got a job in Memphis in obstetrics and gynecology, but continued to live in Clarksdale. To make the commute, she bought an airplane and got her pilot's license, becoming one of the first commuting pilots in the Delta, and the first female pilot. However, she quit her practice in Memphis and began a 36 year long career as health officer and health department physician for the north Delta.

"She saw the folks in need and the folks who didn't have doctors," her son, Marshall Bouldin IV, said as part of a taped tribute shown at the Crystal Ball. Although Bouldin worked ostensibly as a public health official, she provided prenatal care and she helped with deliveries across the region. In the same taped tribute, local businessman Bill Luckett compared Bouldin and her family to the Kennedys.

"If there is a family here in the Mississippi Delta that you could hold up like the Kennedys, it would be the Bouldin family," Luckett said. "We should all aspire to be Mel Bouldin."

After she got her undergraduate degree, Dr. Bouldin married Marshall Bouldin, III, who would become a well known portrait artist.

In 2003 Dr. Bouldin was struck by a truck and she lost her ability to speak and her mobility, although she can still read and communicate. She attended the ceremony with her husband and together they had a photo with Darth Vader.

"This is an honor," her son, Marshall IV, said at the ceremony. "She is a huge Star Wars fan. She even knows what an X Wing fighter is."

Prior winners have included Morgan Freeman, former Governor William Winter and his wife and B.B. King, among others.

The Foundation also honored the Quapaw Canoe company for the work owner John Ruskey does with children from distressed neighborhoods in and around Clarksdale. Ruskey runs a one-on-one training program called the Mighty Quapaw Apprenticeship Program which teaches kids how to become canoe builders and river guides. In addition to the title of Business of the Year, Ruskey was presented with a check from the Community Foundation for \$5,000.

“Wherever your journey takes you and whatever you do in life, may the river be with you,” Ruskey told the audience.

Ruskey, who grew up in the Rocky Mountains, said in an interview that he ended up in the Delta after a five month rafting trip in 1982 and he began building canoes in the 1990s. He established the one-on-one apprenticeship program shortly after opening the canoe company in 1998, and over the years he’s taught about 40 students. He says the primary goal of the program is to train river guides, but along the way his apprentices learn respect of self, of others and the river, as well as teamwork.

“The apprentices learn to work with other people toward a common goal,” Ruskey said. “Everyone has to paddle together in a canoe to get from point A to point B.”

Ruskey said that the \$5,000 award might go toward the construction of another 30-foot voyageur style canoe. French fur trappers used the canoes throughout North America and prized the design for its stability. Ruskey already has two voyageur canoes, both made of cypress, and they’re the workhorses of his operation.

“They’re very stable,” Ruskey said. “You can pile a lot of gear in there and safely take people who have never paddled before like school children and church groups and families onto the dangerous Mississippi. They’re also important for our river cleanup projects.”

Surfing a 300-Mile Long Wave, a documentary about a canoe trip Ruskey took from Memphis to Vicksburg following the 2011 flood will screen at the Clarksdale Film Festival Saturday at 1 p.m. at Delta Cinemas at 11 Third Street.

The Community Foundation is a nonprofit that helps fund charities across eight counties in north Mississippi with an emphasis on the health and education of youth. In 2011 the Foundation raised \$1.4 million. The ball was held at the Arena at Southaven.

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