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## Pointer earns award for contributions to seniors

Senior Scene

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Grosse Pointer Esther Howell is the winner of this year's Claude Pepper Award.

The award, named in honor of the late Florida senator who was a lifelong activist for the nation's elderly, recognizes outstanding Michigan seniors who have helped improve the lives of the elderly.

It was established by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan.

In reading about her lifelong accomplishments, I was astounded not only by the enormity of her contributions, but that she continued her education to achieve what she envisioned as her mission.

Howell graduated from college in 1953 with a degree in sociology and spent two years as a social worker for Wayne County.

"I made visits to some of the poorest neighborhoods, often entering their homes," said Howell. "The experience was invaluable in teaching me firsthand what being poor means."

After the birth of her two sons, Howell became a full-time mother and wife and continued volunteering at her church, the children's school and community organizations.

After her sons were grown, she thought at great length how to spend the rest of her life. "I identified that my primary interest would be to help women, especially older women who often had few resources whether emotional, physical or financial to support them," she said.

"A good friend urged me to apply for an advanced study scholarship offered by the Grosse Pointe American Association of University Women for middle aged women who wanted to return to the work force. I applied and I was awarded the scholarship."

She was accepted to the University of Michigan's Masters Program and received a degree in higher education with a specialist certificate in gerontology.

Now that she had the tools, she approached Wayne County Community College District administrators and convinced them to begin an associate degree program in social gerontology to train students to work with the elderly.

This was a pioneering effort for Howell. Because few such programs existed, she, along with health professionals, social scientists and law professionals, developed the curriculum. She then hired faculty, recruited students and directed and taught the program for the next 14 years.

The program served as a model for other community colleges in Michigan. Howell consulted with them to set up their own gerontology programs.

On her own time she sought and received two federal grants to educate volunteers and professionals to work with the elderly.

Her proudest moments, she said, are seeing former students heading or holding management positions in social agencies serving the senior population.

Howell's accomplishments did not go unnoticed.

She was appointed to the State of Michigan Office of Services to the Aging as a commissioner, a position she held for more than 14 years.

While there, she helped seniors living in rural areas get the same quality of service provided to their counterparts in urban areas.

After completing her work as a commissioner, she was recruited to serve on the Board of Visitors for the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University. The board serves as the development and public relations arm of the institute.

After two years, she was appointed executive chair.

Soon after, her husband, Dave, a retired CPA, was appointed co-chair to help establish a successful business model and approach to fundraising.

The couple's partnership was rare in academic circles but generates nearly \$500,000 in donations each year, leading the institute to financial health.

Their efforts won them the 2008 Community Champion Award for Volunteerism from Molina Healthcare of Michigan.

Esther Howell credits her successes in life to her father, a physician.

He was still seeing patients up to his death at the age of 89, she said.

"He had great expectations for me and taught me by example to always be involved and never to let fear of failure keep you from trying something new," she said.

Esther Howell said she is also grateful to her husband of 54 years.

"Dave has always given me full support in all my efforts. He worked behind the scene with Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Institute of Gerontology, to nominate me for the Claude Pepper Award. I knew nothing of his efforts until I received the honor. It was an act of love and it touched me deeply," Howell said.

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