

Severn activist up for \$25,000 award

Rhonda Ulmer a finalist in "Women of Worth"

By MARC SHAPIRO, Staff Writer
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Rhonda Ulmer isn't your run-of-the-mill community activist. She reaches out to the neighborhood in various capacities as an advocate for health, teachers, parents, students and women.

"Day in, day out, I'm able to give back to my community," said the longtime volunteer at area schools said. "My job doesn't seem like work."

Ulmer, a community health advocate for Johns Hopkins Health Care by day and an active PTA member and parent advocate by night, has been named one of the country's top 10 "Women of Worth" by L'Oreal Paris.

Her \$5,000 award will go to the Van Bokkelen Elementary School PTA in Severn, a group whose membership escalated under her presidency. She was selected out of 2,500 women.

Ulmer could receive an additional \$25,000 if she is named the top woman of worth at a ceremony in New York City on Dec. 8 at the CNN Inspire Summit, where she and the other nine honorees will be publicly recognized. The top woman of worth is determined by online votes. Ulmer is determined to get one million votes.

"I feel very blessed to be selected," Ulmer said. "The women are phenomenal; everyone is doing something to make a difference in their community."

Pat Chandler, chief external affairs officer for the Points of Light Institute, said not only could Ulmer's story inspire others, but her unique approach to solving problems in her community set her apart. Points of Light partners with L'Oreal Paris for Women of Worth.

She was able to say, "Here's what I see: kids can be more successful if they've got the support behind them," Chandler said.

To actually organize people are that and be able to give the skill set to parents and students ... the results speak for themselves."

Ulmer, who was born and raised in Tampa, Fla., first came to Maryland to take her 1-year-old son to Johns Hopkins for seizures. This is what initially

fostered her taste for advocacy. In addition to figuring out how to get her and her son to Baltimore, she had to find her way around a new town.

After settling in Pioneer City, she connected with the principal and social worker at Van Bokkelen Elementary School, who connected her to the community.

Shortly after that, Ulmer received a letter in the mail that the school was in danger of state takeover. She had the option of taking her son to a different school.

"I just get here, get settled in and now I have to move my kid," she said. "So I went to the school to see how I can help."

The principal asked Ulmer to increase parent involvement at the school. At the time, the inactive PTA only had 25 members.

She started the Van Bokkelen Family Network, which brought community resources like the YWCA, Maryland Food Bank School Pantry Program, Boys & Girls Club and the Community Action Agency.

She brought these resources into the school after reaching out to the parents with a survey about their needs. She found that health care, paying rent and providing food for their families were at the top of most parents' lists.

"If you're struggling to provide for the basic needs of your student, how do you get involved with their education?" she said. "What I saw and what I believe is every parent has goals and dreams for their student but not every parent has the resources to make those goals and dreams come true."

Van Bokkelen has now been off the takeover list for four years.

Claudette Robinson, Van Bokkelen's social worker, said she was fortunate to have Ulmer around.

"Her passion and her commitment to seeing students improve academically is what I've always seen in her," she said. "We're just really fortunate to have had such a committed volunteer in the school."

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Ulmer, who served in AmeriCorps shortly after moving to Maryland, got a startup grant from that organization in 2007 and started the University for Parents, which trains parents to be leaders and advocates in their own communities.

Ten parents spanning Anne Arundel, Montgomery, Howard, Prince George's and Baltimore counties and Baltimore City have gone through the program.

Although Ulmer has moved to Seven Oaks in Odenton and her three children attend Seven Oaks Elementary and Meade High School, she still actively mentors the Van Bokkelen PTA. She is a member of her children's school's PTAs as well.

"My passion is parent involvement; I know what it does," she said. "I've gone through the same struggles and now I want to give back."

If Ulmer wins the additional \$25,000 in New York City, she plans to give it to the Maryland Community PTA a non-profit community-based PTA, to expand the University for Parents.

"If I can use my experience to help another, I want to do that," she said. "The parent involvement is getting more challenging now with this economy, so more than ever, the resources are needed to help our families get through this tough time."