



A sense of community: Minister, wife among winners of social justice awards

By **PEG MCNICHOL**
Holland Sentinel contributor
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Holland, MI — The many small good works of a downtown church have resulted in a social justice award for the Rev. Jonathan Brownson and his wife, Jeannette. They arrived at New Community Fourth Reformed Church about two years ago and have always looked beyond the walls of the 113-year-old church.

They immediately set to work brushing up on their Spanish and finding ways to nourish those living nearby, both spiritually and with community meals — using food donated through various programs and partnerships with local businesses such as Pereddie's Restaurant and Deli.

"This neighborhood is a wonderful mix of race and ethnicity and economics," said the Rev. Brownson. "We just love it here."

The Brownsons are being honored for their efforts to bring government and community together, one of five annual recognitions from the City of Holland's community and human relations committee announced this week.

The city rents space from the church for the OurStreet offices. OurStreet provides matching grants and other aid to homeowners for improving their residences. The rent helps the church, and the OurStreet location puts it amidst the very people who need help.

Brownson talks about his neighborhood in terms of needs and assets, with such examples as church members Consuelo "Connie" and her husband Clemente Amaya, who are hosting another church member, Leo Vardo, as he recovers from heart surgery.

"He doesn't have family here," said Connie Amaya. "He is our brother in the faith."

She said the Brownsons deserve the city's social justice award "because they have a heart for the poor. They're very humble people."

True to form, the Brownsons gently insisted on a photo including Vardo, the Amayas and others. The Brownsons emphasize the importance of seeing church as a community and the notion of one church for the city, regardless of denomination.

Jeanette Brownson was delighted when her job as a Realtor for Summit Properties put her in a position to help a new family in town. Erin and Mustapha Feryate decided to move from Sacramento, Calif., to Holland after a nationwide search online for a community where Erin and the couple's 2-year-old son, Zachary, could live while Mustapha is in Iraq as a linguistics contractor. The Feryates paid cash for their home, but barely had enough money left for Erin and Zachary's cross-country move. What happened next illustrates the Brownsons' effect.

"All of a sudden, people just started showing up to help," said Erin Feryate, her eyes

beginning to fill with grateful tears. "Someone donated a good microwave after mine was lost in the move. Someone loaned me a car. Someone donated a Christmas tree."

When Holland City Council officially recognizes the social justice honorees on Jan. 20, the Rev. Brownson plans on being there with plenty of company.

"We do our Living in Community meal for the neighborhood on Wednesdays, so I'm going to see if I can bring the whole crew over that night," he said. "Most — probably many of the people in our neighborhood — have never been to city hall."

WINNERS

Recipients of the City of Holland's annual awards exemplify community service while promoting equal opportunity and social justice for all, according to the city's description. Categories include education, employment, government and community relations, housing, and youth. In addition to the Brownsons, this year's honorees are:

- Youth: Brothers Jim and Max Kwon, natives of Seoul, Korea, are long-term exchange students, each living with a host family. But the young men, both seniors at Holland Christian High School, are dedicated to creating social events that help newcomers from other cultures get comfortable in Holland. Max Kwon, 17, said he wants to give back the kindness of Holland residents in helping him overcome language and other barriers when he first arrived here.
- Employment: Tony Castillo, owner of Milagro Six, parent company of three Holland-area McDonalds. Castillo, a former educator, is active in the community beyond day-to-day business. He is past chairman of the Holland Chamber of Commerce and supports a wide array of youth events. He also serves on Hope College's board of trustees and is a founding member of the Tulipanes Latino Art and Film festival.
- Housing: Lucia Rios, Lakeshore Disability Network accessibility specialist, for her enthusiastic efforts to teach the community,

particularly property owners, about the importance of recognizing and responding to the needs and rights of the disabled.

- Education: The Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance Migrant Mentoring Program, which aims at building bridges between Holland's Mexican population and the community's many other cultures, excelled at matching about 70 children from local migrant worker camps with volunteer mentors.

The five awards will be presented at the Holland City Council meeting at 7 p.m. Jan. 20 at city hall, 270 S. River Avenue. A reception will follow the presentation.

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