

HUMAN RELATIONS “ PEACEMAKERS “ GATHER FOR THE JOHN ANSON FORD AWARDS FOR 2007



Los Angeles – The Millennium Biltmore Hotel was site of the 2007 John Anson Ford Human Relations Awards, and the theme “Celebrating our Unity” was clearly prevalent during the stellar event.

The pre-luncheon ambiance was enhanced by classic Harry Belafonte songs and contemporary compositions from Ozomatli, a musical group. Both Belafonte and Ozomatli were being honored for their human relations work.

Radio personality Talaya Trigueros was the emcee and she got the luncheon off to a moving start with an invocation by Rabbi Allen Freehling, head of L.A.’s City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission.

Rabbi Freehling offered a prayer for those who have lost their homes and property in the infernos of Southern California and pointed out that the acts of kindness that we do for one another under exceptional circumstances are the acts of generosity and kindness we should be doing on a daily basis.

He was followed by Valerie Baker who did a rousing rendition of “America the Beautiful.”

Ms. Trigueros then introduced the Commission’s President, Adrian Dove. President Dove presented the other commissioners and the staff to the assembled guests. Ms Trigueros then introduced Haley Pham, a young person who is a student at Taft High School.

Taft High School is part of the “No Haters Here/zerohour program, a countywide project that involves six schools from various areas of the county: Artesia, Taft, Grant, Gardena, Hart and Pomona High Schools.

Each of the schools faces challenges in dealing with intergroup relations.

Taft High School, was showcased earlier in the day when a presentation of the “No Haters Here – Zerohour schools initiative” and other Taft programs was made to Her Majesty, Queen Rania of Jordan. Queen Rania’s visit to Taft was arranged by the

Commission on Human Relations, which in 2005 began working with the school, where a brawl among students prompted a campus lockdown.

Haley, a key leader of what is called the SPIRIT class at Taft High, made a presentation of the various issues and solutions provided on the campus of Taft High since 2005. She explained how the SPIRIT class had worked to eradicate prejudice by conducting anti-bias workshops and field trips to the Museum of Tolerance for their peers.

The various JAF award winners were presented to the audience through a series of videos produced by KTTV/Fox 11 that have recently been airing on television. They included a smiling group of youngsters from Pomona High School and their leader, Bernardo Rosa, a man who has negotiated and implemented truces between gangs involved in racialized gang violence.

The Second District winner, Dianne Schweitzer, the coordinator for Gardena High School's Healthy Start Collaborative, spoke of the importance of her mentors in her development, and gave a special thanks to her husband, who "managed to get the pizza to the table when she did not have time to cook."

Dave Velasquez, the Third District winner, has spent 27 years at the exclusive college prep campus of Brentwood School where he is Director of Student Life. He mentioned the inspiration of his mother, a Mexican-American woman who dreamed of a college education for her son, and his befuddlement when he obtained a scholarship to Stanford University and left home. "It was a real challenge," he recalls.

The Fourth District winner, Charlene Lovett, was not able to attend the luncheon, but Commissioner Lea Ann King spoke of Ms. Lovett's courage in picking up the pieces of her life after the senseless murder of her daughter, Cheryl, and how Ms. Lovett had rallied her own internal forces to wage a war against ethnic hatred and gang violence.

Najeeba Syeed-Miller, the Executive Director of the Western Justice Center Foundation, and the Center's founder, Judge Dorothy Nelson, came to the stage to talk about the great work of the Western Justice Center Foundation.

Syeed-Miller spoke movingly about her own dedication to the cause of peace, noting that she came from the Middle East, where too many people had perished because of ineffective efforts to resolve problems and conflicts.

"It is not enough to come together to eat and laugh together. Each one of us must be dedicated, each and every day, to do our part to create a state of harmony and peace where we live and work. I have a young child, and I am determined to see a world of peace become commonplace for my child's generation."

The Courage Award winners were the musical group, Ozomatli, and this derived not only from the band's effort to promote social justice to diverse communities and disenfranchised youth, but also because they have, in their music, continued to communicate positive messages of unity, peace and justice.

The John Allen Buggs Leadership Award winners were Harry Belafonte and William Taylor, the head of "Unity One." Mr. Belafonte could not be present, but his acceptance speech was given by a family friend, Ms. Shabazz.

Bo Taylor accepted his award from William Taylor, grandson of the late John Allen Buggs, and son of the 2005 John Allen Buggs recipient, Zara Buggs Taylor.

Taylor is someone who overcame a history of gang and criminal activity to become an authentic peacemaker, what Bo Taylor says is his "true calling."

He established Unity One to teach life management skills to inmates at Los Angeles County jails and across the country. Since then, Taylor has created five offspring organizations that work for peace through intervention/prevention techniques, and maintain ceasefire agreements that exist to this day.

Taylor has joined forces with Latino gang peacemakers to stop the gang violence, and through his widely listened to radio program, reaches out across color lines with a message of truth and peace.