



For Immediate Release: 05.05.06

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Human Rights Award Winners Named

A woman whose commitment to community spans more than 20 years and an organization committed to fighting discrimination of all forms, are the winners of the first annual Oak Park Community Relations Commission's Human Rights Awards.

Gale Zemel, whose accomplishments include founding the *Wonder Works Children's Museum*, and being a tireless supporter of the Oak Park Food Pantry and Vital Bridges, was named the winner in the individual category.

The Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association (OPALGA), founded in 1989, was named the winner in the non-profit organization category.

"We really wanted to uplift and highlight significant service through a demonstrated commitment to human rights, diversity and equality," said Catherine Bendowitz, Community Relations Commission chair. "The nominations of Gale Zemel and the Oak Park Area Gay and Lesbian Association were exemplary in helping us spotlight the kind of exceptional community service we sought."

Zemel's other volunteer services include work with the Anti-Defamation League, School District 97 and Lambs Farm, non-profit organization serving adults with developmental disabilities. Her nomination form spoke in particular to her work in "safeguarding equality, diversity and human rights" especially for children, Bendowitz noted.

OPALGA was originally formed as an outgrowth of the work by its founders to include sexual orientation in the Village's Human Rights Ordinance. Today, the organization continues to be an advocate at the local and state levels, but also sponsors many cultural events, and provides direct services for youth and young adults.

In being nominated OPAGLA was noted for its work to "foster a community wide understanding of issues that LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bi-sexual/Transgender) people face through direct outreach and interaction with local community organizations."

"We were extremely pleased with the number of and the quality of nominations we received this first year," Bendowitz said. "Because of the initial interest and our actually making our first awards, we expect to see even more participation in the nominations process in 2007."

For more information on the award and the winners, call 358.5400 or email community@oak-park.us.

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