

# THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

## 2007 Human Rights Award recipients John and Bonnie Schlagel believe in the good of people.

by Tessa M. Christensen

STAR Assistant Editor

Someday, John Schlagel of Cambridge is going to die. When he reaches those pearly gates and is asked if he did anything for others, he intends to have a good answer.

So he fills his days by assisting at community events, serving on non-profit boards and generally helping others.

His wife, Bonnie does the same.

Their dedication to the community was honored on Monday, Jan. 15, 2007 when they were presented the Isanti County Human Rights Award.

"When many of us think of a project and think it's too great to achieve, it's just a doable challenge to this team," said Cambridge Mayor Marlys Palmer as she presented the award. "They always look beyond themselves. Their ability to draw many people together to work cooperatively is a great achievement."

While pondering John and Bonnie's contribution to the community, Palmer reflected on Mark Twain's words. "Make a career of humanity. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country and a finer world to live in."

Neither John nor Bonnie feel they do anything remarkable.

Instead they point to the many other people they know who make things happen. Many people consider a philanthropist to be someone who gives away their money. Not John. "The most important thing is people who are philanthropists with their time. They never get that back," he remarked. "You'll get another check next week, but you'll never get your time back."

Both John and Bonnie are honored to have been given the Human Rights Award, yet John remarked that had he been asked, he could have supplied the names of 30 deserving people.

"We don't really do anything extraordinary," said Bonnie.

Others think they do.

*Dedicated to the community*

The list of organizations John and Bonnie Schlagel have

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~JOHN SCHLAGEL



impacted is a long one. While both are active, John is on the board of "everything," according to his wife. Since becoming "unemployed" when he retired as president of Schlagel, Inc. seven years ago, John is active with the Initiative Foundation, Isanti County Historical Society, ARC Retreat Center, Cambridge Community College Foundation, Cambridge Knights of Columbus, C-I Bike/Walk Trail Committee, C-I Community Education Committee, C-I Early Childhood Coalition, C-I Dollars for Scholars Foundation, Catholic Foundation of the Diocese of St Cloud, Central Minnesota Community Land Trust, Christ the King Finance Council, Community Benefit Council, Community Harbor, East Central Minnesota Workforce Partnership, Family Pathways, Isanti County Corrections Advisory Board, Isanti County Trails & Greenspace for Life/ALBD, ISD#911 System Accountability Team, New Pathways, Inc., Pine Technical College Foundation, Rotary Club of Cambridge, Rum River Interfaith Caregivers, Inc., and Towards Zero Death. He's also serving his second term on the Cambridge City Council.

Last year, Bonnie took a sabbatical from her volunteer work in order to care for her mother, who was diagnosed with cancer, and her brother, who spent months hospitalized after a kidney transplant. Yet she's contin-

ued to help organize the Snowflake Parade and the Southerland Celebrity Golf Tournament. Over the years, she served on the boards of the Cambridge Medical Center, Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, Community Harbor, Industries, Inc. and METO (which she's still on). Bonnie has also been involved in the Cambridge Rotary Club.

In 2001, the couple received the Initiative Foundation Outstanding Philanthropist award for the \$500,000 donor-advised fund they created.

"Those who have been privileged to be in a position to observe this exceptionally generous couple have witnessed their commitment to helping others, and are challenged to do likewise by their outstanding record of giving and doing," said Initiative Foundation President Kathy Gaalswyk at the 2001 award presentation.

The couple prefer to make donations anonymously, and have to be coaxed into talking about what they've supported.

They're quick to praise others, however. Bonnie can't say enough about the volunteers at the Harbor Room, many who have battled cancer themselves. "They are so giving," she stated. "They're right there without batting an eye."

She talked about Bob and Della Theis who fall in the same category. The Cambridge Lions who stepped up to help this year

at the Snowflake Parade. Suzie Carlson who took over organizing the chili feed after the parade. Jerry Nelson who loaned his truck to one float participant when their's broke down while lining up. The list goes on.

Whenever she asks for help, people show up, noted Bonnie. "I never have a problem asking people for help with the golf tournament. I might strong-arm them a little bit," she admitted. "When I'm involved, I get a little crazy. When you're excited about something, and you start talking to someone else it's contagious."

It's easy for people who don't work to find time to volunteer, said John. But those who fit in volunteering between a full-time job or carting the kids to soccer practice, those are people he admires. "Maybe they can't do much, but what they do is a sacrifice."

"I used to feel like I'm only one person, what can I do?" observed Bonnie. "But I can do something. I'm not going to stop doing something because I can't do everything."

### Rewarding work

As a girl growing up in Eagan, Bonnie was a candystriper. She really enjoyed the hours she spent at Divine Redeemer in South St. Paul. Her daughter began doing the same at Mercy hospital in Coon Rapids when she was 13.

One day over 10 years ago, District 911 Community Education Adult Basic Education Coordinator Vicki Ostrom mentioned to Bonnie that Industries, Inc. needed volunteer teachers. Bonnie decided to try it and see how it went.

"I really, really enjoyed it as I felt like I was making a difference," said Bonnie. She worked with mentally and physically challenged individuals doing a little bit of everything. It was through her involvement there that she and John met.

John grew up in south Minneapolis and moved to Cambridge in 1975. His father had located his business in the city's first industrial park in 1957. This year, Schlagel, Inc. celebrates its 50th anniversary. Upon retiring, John began filling his days with volunteer activities.

## THEY'VE HELPED THEIR FELLOW MAN

### Human Rights Award Recipients

- 1997 Shirley Holyfield
- 1998 Evelyn Puffer
- 1999 Braham Area School Student Council
- 2000 Jim Donahue
- 2001 Louis & Barbara Leisure
- 2002 Richard Coland
- 2003 Larry Ostrom
- 2004 Larry Southerland
- 2005 Son Duong
- 2006 Dehl Lindstrom
- 2007 John & Bonnie Schlagel

One of his favorite sayings may help explain how John lives his life. "The biggest abuse of power is when those who have the ability to do good do nothing."

Thus John makes sure he does something. He's often found doing the jobs others don't want, like cleaning up the kitchen after a benefit or standing behind a hot grill. "I tended to go to jobs people didn't necessarily want to do, like cleaning up after an event," said John. "Not a whole lot of people want to stick around."

John and Bonnie believe that if given the opportunity, most people will do good. John pointed to the neighbor who shovels the driveway of the widow next door.

"I think that most people are good and they help others," said John. He does wish he could change the fascination people have with the negative, however. John pointed out that in the local media most of the stories are positive, yet people focus on the few negative stories.

"I wish there was a way to change people's attitudes. If everyone could put on rose-colored glasses, it would be wonderful," he said.

John appreciates all people. "There's been no one I've ever met that I haven't learned something from," stated John. "You learn from everyone if you keep your eyes open."

His wife agreed. "I think you take away something from everyone."

~ Tessa M. Christensen, [asst.ed@cambridgenn.com](mailto:asst.ed@cambridgenn.com)