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Chamber honors local businesses

By **Boyd Fletcher**
The Aurora Sentinel



Al Lui, co-owner and manager of Mt. Fuji, Japanese Cuisine Sushi and Hibachi, poses Tuesday, April 15, at Mt. Fuji, located in the Southlands Shopping Center in Aurora. Liu was honored as the Business Person of the Year for 2008 by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. (Photo by Heather A. Longway-Burke/The Aurora Sentinel)

AURORA | Congressman Ed Perlmutter, activist Gayle Jetchick and a host of other business and community leaders were honored April 11 at the 53rd annual Aurora Chamber of Commerce Awards Banquet held at the Radisson Hotel Southeast in Aurora. More than 500 Aurora business owners and civic leaders were in attendance.

Chamber President Kevin Hougen hosted the "Phantom of the Opera"-themed gala, which included actors portraying characters from the musical, Chamber members in period costume and live performances of some of the famous numbers from the musical sung by touring cast members.

Both live and silent auctions also were held as a fundraiser for chamber programs.

Winners are not told of the award and are often caught off guard by the chamber's presentation, which displays childhood photographs of the recipient while giving a brief biography.

"I saw a picture of a little red wagon and I thought, 'I used to have a little wagon like that,'" said Gayle Jetchick, winner of the Woman of the Year Award. "When the second picture popped up of a little girl in a dress I thought, 'That looks just like my favorite dress when I was a little girl.' Then it hit me."

Hougen said it is often hard to single out one person over another, but this year Jetchick made it easy through her devotion to getting the **Havana Business Improvement District** off the ground and running.

Invited as a neighborhood guest to one of the initial meetings, Jetchick took it upon herself to compile a mostly complete list of property owners along the bustling arterial.

Signatures from the property owners were necessary for the initial steps of putting the BID to voters.

"I live here, and it is important to me," said Jetchick of her initial work helping to clean up the stretch of road. "Aurora is a nice area with nice people, but it has that perception (of being trashy). We need to change the perception that this is a dangerous and dirty place."

Jetchick, 56, soon found herself leading the charge to get the necessary 700 signatures from business and property owners along a 4.3-mile stretch of Havana.

Working to collect signatures during the day while still managing her own job in the healthcare industry was challenging, she said.

"(The business owners) really wanted this to happen, but they just didn't have the time," she said.

Jetchick, who has lived in Aurora since 1973 when her husband was transferred to the former Fitzsimons Army Hospital, now works full-time for the fledgling district.

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"She is a doer, a tireless worker, organized, competent, detailed-oriented and a genuine contributor to our community," said Hougen at the event.

Not to be outdone in the old-picture category, however, the Chamber's Man of the Year Award presentation started out with a judo-chopping, feather-haired, quarter-century-old picture of Rep. Ed Perlmutter that elicited a boisterous laugh from the representative's sister.

"Now that is a great picture," said Cassie Perlmutter, wiping a tear from her eye.

Elected to the Colorado State Senate in 1994 as the first Democrat in nearly 30 years to his district, Perlmutter established himself as being open to bipartisan ideas as well as a strong supporter for renewable energy in the state.

In 2006, Perlmutter was elected to represent Colorado in the U.S. Congress for a new district that includes much of Aurora. Recently Perlmutter requested \$331,000 in federal funding from the Labor, Health and Human Services budget to help the Community College of Aurora become a top training center for first responders preparing for disasters.

The money will help create the 1,758-square-foot, \$1.8 million Critical Incident Theater, a simulation training facility for disaster responders in the state and around the nation.

"His support for our active duty military and for the thousands of veterans in our community is widely viewed as a tremendous asset to our community," said Hougen at the event.

"I am so honored and surprised to receive this award," said Perlmutter. "I first joined the Aurora Chamber in 2005. Since then, I've seen first-hand the amazing contributions this organization makes to the community, the region and the state, and I love being a part of this group. I am honored to represent Aurora in Congress and to be able to fight for the values and opportunities that make this a special place to live, work and raise a family."

Others were honored for their contribution to the business community.

Having opened up his restaurant, Mt. Fuji, just over a year ago, Al Liu says he was truly taken back by receiving the Business Person of the Year award.

An immigrant to America and a Purdue graduate, Liu came to Aurora a few years ago and established the hibachi restaurant with the help of his family in one of Aurora's newest areas, Southlands.

Liu thanked the city's small business development staff for helping him get off the ground, as well as for their support of his restaurant through their patronage.

"You all really like to party," he said to city staff who have frequented his restaurant, receiving loud applause.

Hougen said Liu was nominated for the award not only for owning a successful business in the community, but for also being a part of the community through donations of time and space to organizations like Aurora Public Schools, The Children's Hospital and the local YMCA.

"I feel that I have a mission now and that I am obligated to do more for our community and give back to it more," he said. "I don't feel I deserve the award actually, but I will make it a promise to the community."

While he thought he was at the event to simply say the invocation and spend time with friends, Pastor Robert Gelinás found himself looking at a childhood picture of himself on the video display reserved for the winners.

"I saw a picture of me at 2 years old, and that's when it dawned on me," he said.

Gelinás was honored with the Humanitarian Award for his work as both the pastor of the Colorado Community Church and as well as his work with Project 127, an adoption ministry that helps the state's foster children find homes,

Born and raised in Aurora, Gelinás said the award is an honor to receive from his hometown Chamber.

"Noone does what they do for awards, we do it for a love of God and our



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community," he said. "But it feels good to be recognized."

Gelinas said he should be sharing the award with his wife, who has supported him and their five adopted children while serving as an active member of the congregation.

Other award winners were: First Bank for the Business for the Arts Award, the Aurora Rotary Club for Community Leadership, Jim Suss for Chamber Leadership, Lee Cooperman of FastSigns for Small Business Person of the Year, and Pinnacol Assurance for Business of the Year.

At the end of the night, the Chamber announced new chamber board officers. Jo Snell, spokeswoman for the E-470 Public Highway Authority, was named as chairwoman-elect; Craig Ward of Padgett Business Services was selected as board chairman; Diane Garcia of 2G Associates was named secretary; and David Patterson of Rural Metro Ambulance was named treasurer.

The annual Chamber awards honor people and businesses in nine categories: Business for the Arts, Humanitarian service, Community Leadership, Chamber Leadership, Small Business Person of the Year, Business Person of the Year, Business of the Year and both the Man and Woman of the Year awards.

"We had another great evening Friday," said Hougen. "We honored some great people and organizations in our community, raised some money that will sustain and grow some critical Chamber programs and generally had a wonderful time. The staff and volunteers worked hard to make it look effortless - I especially appreciate that."

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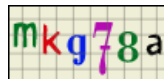
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