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The businesses, individuals and nonprofit being honored at this year's Ethics in Business Awards said they were surprised to be recognized for something so ingrained in their day-to-day operations.

"When individuals, nonprofits, and businesses are deeply rooted in ethical practices, it becomes second nature and is like a reflex that you don't even think about," said Laurie Roche, director of resource development at Samaritan Counseling Center, who is coordinating this year's awards dinner.

For the 2011 award recipients, ethics are "as basic as inhaling and exhaling," she said.

Six will be honored this year at the center's 12th annual New Mexico Ethics in Business Awards. The celebration dinner will take place May 5 at Hotel Albuquerque.

The Jack and Donna Rust Award for Excellence in Ethical Business Practice by For-Profit Business will go to Andy Lee General Contractor, First Born Program and Los Poblanos Organics.

The Hopkins Award for Excellence in Ethical Practice by a Nonprofit Organization goes to the Women's Economic Self-Sufficiency Team, or WESST. Barbara Allender will receive the PNM/Akerman Award for Individual Excellence.

A new award this year — the Bill Daniels Award for Individual Ethical Entrepreneurship — will be awarded to Betty Chao, founder and owner of Westech International Inc.

The center received 47 nominations this year — up from 31 last year.

"An army of volunteers" help determine winners, Roche said. A committee narrowed the nominations to 30 and handed off the project to students in a business ethics class at the University of New Mexico Anderson School of Management.

Students interview the nominees and put together a report on each. From those reports, a volunteer committee determines the winners.

Roche said she is expecting "a full house" of about 800 to attend the awards banquet this year.

Gold sponsors for the banquet are the Journal's Monday Business Outlook, New Mexico Bank & Trust, PNM, Presbyterian Healthcare Services, Samaritan Counseling Center and the UNM Anderson School of Management.

Andy Lee General Contractor

Andy Lee had never heard of the Ethics in Business Awards until he learned he was nominated for one.

"Since then I have learned it's a big deal," he told the Journal during an interview at his office at 3435 B Girard NE.

The company, started in 1998, does tenant improvement and remodeling work in existing buildings. It also offers carpentry work by the hour.

"The construction industry is not exactly known for high standards" partly because it attracts people on a temporary basis, said Lee, owner of the company. "For those of us who are in it for the long hall, it's important for us to perform ethically and honorably, with integrity and reliability."

When you enter the business near Candelaria and Girard NE, you will see the company's mission, code of conduct and a picture of "our head carpenter," or Jesus, hanging on the wall.

The company also has a division called Samaritan Services, which offers free or low cost remodeling and construction work for essential projects for widows, single mothers, and women whose husbands are deployed or who are caring for children who are not living with their parents.

The company began Samaritan Services in 2007, but the program is now offered through East Central Ministries.

First Born Program

Vicki Johnson used to make home visits to mentally ill mothers when she worked as a counselor in Michigan.

She thought, "Why should you have to be diagnosed as mentally ill to get parenting services?"

That thought inspired a business called First Born Program, which is focused on educating and supporting first-time parents through home visits.

She designed the business just before moving to Silver City, which is where it started in 1997. Similar programs have sprouted in Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, Socorro, Santa Fe, Valencia, Sandoval and Bernalillo counties, and now in Guatemala.

"The hallmark of it was no family had to be labeled or at risk," she said. "The criteria was just you have to be parenting for the first time."

Ethics and confidentiality are important aspects of how the business is run. Clients expect it, and employees are trained in it, Johnson said. "If you don't have a program that the community sees as ethical, who will let you come into their house?" she said.

Los Poblanos Organics

Ethics came naturally for Monte Skarsgard who runs a company focused on getting fresh organic food to local people.

"The ethics thing is something we just do," he said. "It's not something we put a lot of time and effort into."

The company was founded in 2003 by Skarsgard, who then had one other employee and one farm. It has grown to about 35 employees, who are kept apprised about how the business is run, as well as two farms in the Albuquerque area and one in Las Cruces. The farms are used to grow organic produce year round, and that food then goes out to about 3,200 customers in Los Alamos, Santa Fe, Placitas, Rio Rancho, Albuquerque, Cedar Crest, Socorro and Las Cruces.

"We try hard to take care of our employees and the land," Skarsgard said. "We don't do it for recognition, but it's nice to be honored for it."

The company not only delivers a box of fresh produce to its customers every week along with other fresh local or regional items like meat, eggs and bread, but also it will work with customers to make sure they can afford the food, Skarsgard said.

The company also offers a farming apprenticeship program. Six of those interns have started local farms, and seven have gone on to work for Los Poblanos Organics, he said.

"It's something we value a lot. The state needs a lot of new growers," he said. "We have land and sun, we just don't have the growers to make it happen."

WESST

The Women's Economic Self-Sufficiency Team, or WESST, has celebrated a few milestones in the past couple of years.

It opened a \$10.4 million, state-of-the-art, 37,000-square-foot, mixed-use enterprise center at 609 Broadway NE in 2009. It celebrated its 21st birthday last year, marking 2,035 business starts that have created 3,200 jobs with \$4.5 million in loans.

Now, it's being awarded for ethics — "a really special award," says Agnes Noonan, executive director of the organization that offers training, consulting, loans and incubation, among other services to new and existing small businesses around the state.

"I think that's really important that we can publicly claim we are an organization that places value on integrity, doing what we say we are going to do, striving to excel even though we know we'll never get there."

Being honest with clients is a big part of that, Noonan said, even if it means saying no to a loan request or business idea.

“We are always in a place of helping people. ... However, starting your own business is difficult.”

Noonan said the award also speaks to WESST’s long-term commitment to small businesses in New Mexico.

WESST was founded in 1989 as an organization that focused on women who wanted to start or grow businesses, but it now offers services to new or existing businesses around the state.

Barbara Allender

Barbara Allender has done a lot for the nonprofit world, but she has done the work because she is passionate about it, not for the recognition, she said.

“I’m not big on awards,” she told the Journal. “But this one means more to me because of the extent to which nominees are evaluated. ... It’s a much more rigorous process.”

Allender, who serves on the board of the Roadrunner Food Bank and as president of the New Mexico Association of Food Banks, started her volunteer work with the League of Women Voters in 1960, serving for 16 years before she started working for United Way of Central New Mexico. She then spent 16 years there.

“I did a lot of work with those volunteers and agencies affiliated with United Way,” she said. “I always said I had the best job in town because I got to meet all kinds of people.”

She retired from United Way in 1992 and was later appointed as a co-receiver along with Joe Badal for the disbursement of the Wilhelmina Coe or 1957 Peace Foundation estate. After seven years of work, \$7.2 million from the estate was distributed to different organizations in the state.

She also helped form Saranam, a nonprofit that helps homeless families with children.

Betty Chao

The founder and owner of Westech International said she had never heard of the Ethics in Business Awards before she was nominated for it.

She said another small business owner in the same field nominated her for the award because “she recognized we are pretty straight shooters and we’re trying to be as helpful to other small businesses as possible.”

Reputation is everything, Chao says. “We are a very high-quality, high-integrity firm,” she said.

Founded in 1995, the company offers support services to federal agencies. It has 320 employees working in 14 states.

Chao says she was shaped for ethics by her father and conducts her business with ethics in mind.

“We try to maintain the high road because (even though) it’s something that may not help us right now, it might hurt us, customers will always remember,” she said.

The company follows a win-win-win model for deciding on whether to take contracts, making sure each contract benefits the client, the company and its employees. Conflicts of interest are avoided, Chao says.

The company will also pay for any full-time employee to get a degree from an educational institution as long as the education relates to the employee’s job.

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-- Email the reporter at rbrodsky@abqjournal.com. Call the reporter at 505-823-3820

