

Hartford Courant

4/11/07

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BR!CKs Honor Those Building A Better World

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April 11 2007

Most awards shows are about red carpets, celebrities and achievements in entertainment.

The BR!CK awards, which will be televised Thursday on The CW network, are designed to honor regular folks who have helped change the world

The awards salute a dozen North Americans, up to age 25, who have initiated work to improve their communities and the world.

"This isn't your typical celebrity award show," says Nancy Lubin, CEO of the BR!CK Awards. "The kids are first and foremost the focus."

Petra Nemcova and Lance Armstrong will also receive awards for their charity work, but, Lubin says, "All of the celebrities involved will be introduced for their charitable contributions, not for their background in the entertainment industry. We are honoring young people who maybe can't sing or skate, young people who took it upon themselves to make changes where changes needed to be made, to do the really important work that often goes unnoticed.

"I'm looking forward to making these kids more famous than Paris Hilton."

Connecticut has a special reason to be proud: A quarter of the 12 honorees - who this year range in age from 11 to 25 - are from the Nutmeg State, winning in three of the four eligible categories.

A winner in the health category, Jennifer Staple, 25, of Newtown, founded her organization, Unite for Sight, while working in an eye doctor's office during a summer break from Yale. She wanted to find a way to bring awareness of a preventable cause of blindness to more people, first nationally and then internationally.

Today, Unite for Sight delivers eye-care screening and education programs to more than 400,000 people through 90 chapters worldwide. It has sponsored more than 6,000 sight-restoring surgeries worldwide and collected and distributed over 200,000 pairs of glasses.

Another Yale student, Ruth DeGolia, 24, of New Haven, launched an organization to connect indigenous artisans in Guatemala to markets in the U.S.

What began as a Fair Trade crafts sale on campus led to the Mercado Global, an organization with its own catalog that provides fair wages to more than 170 artisans in 15 partner cooperatives across Guatemala. DeGolia won in the category of global impact.

Jacob Komar, 14, of Burlington, a winner in the category of community building, began refurbishing discarded computers at age 9 to give them to schools, prisons and other places that otherwise wouldn't have one. His organization, Computers for Communities, has also been involved in a campaign to teach people how to use the computers, in hopes of bridging the so-called digital divide between those with computer knowledge and those without.

Like the nine other winners, who all are from the U.S. and Canada, the three will each win a \$10,000 community grant to continue their work. Four of the 12 will win an additional \$15,000 for their organizations as Golden Brick winners, as voted online.

The awards have been presented since 1996 by a nonprofit organization called Do Something, but this year's are the first to be televised. Applications for the award are read by a sampling of past winners, who narrow the field to 24; the 12 winners are chosen after interviews. Online voting ended Monday to select the four Golden BR!CK Award Winners.

There will be some celebrities involved in the program, which is the first awards show for the CW, a first-year network.

LeAnn Rimes will host the event. Among the presenters are Wyclef Jean, Jamie Lynn Sigler, Susan Sarandon, Damien Fahey, Hilarie Burton, Bryan Greenberg, Hilary Swank and Jason Ritter. Mandy Moore and Dashboard Confessional - led by another Connecticut native, Chris Carrabba - will perform.

But they aren't the point of the show, organizers say. Says producer Alex Coletti: "It will be great to watch the celebrities stand up and cheer for these young people, who are making such an incredible difference in the world around them."

THE BR!CK AWARDS will be broadcast Thursday at 9 p.m. on The CW, locally on WTXN, Channel 20.