

## **Award recipient spent years caring for area children**

Keri Brenner

Collene Van Wormer remembers most the little girl who said she coped with being home alone after school by getting in bed and pulling up the covers.

Van Wormer, who served as the South Sound YMCA child care services director for 15 years, said she immediately placed the girl in a community child care center — a service she repeated hundreds of times.

"Being home alone like that was not safe, and I wanted those kids to be safe," she recalled before 220 people at a luncheon Friday at Saint Martin's University to mark the close of the 2007-08 campaign for United Way of Thurston County.

Van Wormer, 68, of Olympia, who retired three years ago after a medical procedure left her legally blind, was one of seven award recipients at the event.

She received the Gladys Burns Human Service Award for her caring, commitment and dedication, Mike Williams, United Way president said. The award is named after the late Gladys Burns, a human-services advocate and community volunteer.

"We all talk about wanting to help children, but this is somebody who has walked the walk," Williams said in giving the award to Van Wormer, who received a standing ovation.

The 2007-08 United Way campaign raised a record \$1.75 million, up from \$1.3 million last year, said co-chairs Cathy Wolfe, Thurston County commissioner, and Mike Edwards, founder of Thurston First Bank.

Williams said he hopes to take in \$200,000 more before the campaign ends March 31.

"We want to change the world," Pam Toal, United Way executive director, told the group. "Thurston County is our world."

The organization supports 48 programs at 34 agencies, she added.

Several of Van Wormer's former colleagues said her influence extended almost as much to her employees as it did to the children she helped.

Ron White, who worked under Van Wormer at the South Sound YMCA for more than a decade and succeeded her, said she was such a positive leader that employees never left.

The YMCA office oversees more than 30 child care centers serving more than 1,500 children at schools and other facilities in Thurston, Mason and Lewis counties.

Van Wormer, who previously worked in early-childhood development at Centralia College, said she has fond memories of single mothers who thanked her years later for allowing them the freedom to go to school or work. Another milestone, Van Wormer said, was establishing a child care center at South Puget Sound Community College to serve more than 100 children.

"We helped children who would have lived in the backseat of their cars," she said.

Van Wormer's blindness resulted from a radiation treatment for a non-cancerous tumor on her pituitary gland. The radiation damaged her optic nerve, which runs alongside the gland, she said.

Van Wormer said a 30-day course of treatment in a hyperbaric chamber in Seattle improved her sight so that she can now see outlines and images. Friends, acquaintances and even strangers volunteered to drive her to Seattle for 30 days, she said.

"She was my mentor," said Lulu Scofield of Olympia, Van Wormer's longtime colleague and friend who sat next to her at the luncheon. "She was teaching the teachers."

Keri Brenner covers Thurston County for The Olympian. She can be reached at 360-754-5435 or [kbrenner@theolympian.com](mailto:kbrenner@theolympian.com).