

## Southington YMCA honors community leaders

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SOUTHINGTON — A local artist, the leader of the town's school system and an organization that provides a variety of levels of care for older residents were honored Monday at the Southington Community YMCA.

Dr. Joseph Erardi Jr., the town's superintendent of schools, is the YMCA's Person of the Year. Mary DeCroce, a local artist and art teacher, received the Unsung Hero award. Central Connecticut Senior Health Services was chosen for the Reaching Out Award.

"I can't think of a better group to honor," said Terry Lombardi, president of the Southington Community YMCA's Board of Directors. "They're community visionaries. They do more than give back to the community. They have a purpose and they involve others in it."

Erardi and Trish Walden, vice president of Central Connecticut Senior Health Services, are also on the board of directors.

John Myers, executive director of the Southington Community YMCA, said Erardi has "had a lot of impact in a relatively short period of time."

"He jumped in full speed ahead," Myers said. "Dr. Erardi is like E.F. Hutton. When he speaks, people listen. We thank him for his guidance and wisdom."

Central Connecticut Senior Health Services is a non-profit that manages local nursing homes — The Orchards, Mulberry Gardens and Jerome Home, as well as Arbor Rose in New Britain and Connecticut Center for Healthy Aging. They also run numerous outreach services for older residents who are still living on their own.

"With an aging population, they are needed," Myers said. "They also help with the health and wellness initiative for town and school employees."

DeCroce teaches art classes at the YMCA and was instrumental in the "Harvest the Arts" program that runs on the second weekend of the Apple Harvest Festival. Downtown businesses and organizations get involved in a series of art-themed events, such as art workshops, gallery-style shows and Meet the Artist nights. Last year, the Pepper Pot allowed school students to paint a mural depicting various downtown scenes past and present on the restaurant's walls. DeCroce coordinated that effort. As co-chairwoman of Relay for Life, she implemented a fundraiser where a large purple cake sculpture was placed on people's lawns and they had to pay to send it to someone else.

"She's like the Energizer Bunny," Myers said. "She keeps going and going. We have a lot of artistic talent in town. She is making it more visible."

Myers also pointed out a bench in the YMCA's front lobby DeCroce decorated last year with some help from local youngsters.

DeCroce said she found out she was to receive the award a few weeks ago.

"It's a great honor," she said. "I'm very surprised and appreciative."

Erardi said the award was not only an honor for him, but for all the school district's employees.

"It's an extension of their work," he said. "I happen to be the person in front. It's also humbling to be honored by an organization I regard so highly."

Central Connecticut Senior Health Services was represented by Walden, Erika Copes, director of marketing and business development, and Sharon Robinson, director of senior care coordination.

"We would do this no matter what," Walden said. "It's an honor to be recognized for what we do every day."

Walden said Central Connecticut Senior Health Services provides "one-stop shopping" for health services for local senior citizens. Even something simple, like a blood pressure reading at a blood pressure clinic at Price Chopper, helps seniors become familiar with the organization's staff so that if health issues arise later, they will know who to talk to.

The staff also talks to the senior citizens to see if they or someone they know is experiencing age-related health problems.

Erardi, DeCroce and Central Connecticut Senior Health Services will be honored at the YMCA's annual meeting, scheduled for Feb. 2