Mayor Hancock, Commissions Honor 10 Community Members with Mayor’s Diversity and Inclusion Awards

DENVER – Mayor Michael B. Hancock and members of his community commissions last night honored 10 individuals and organizations with the 2017 Mayor’s Diversity and Inclusion Awards at an event themed “Denver’s Commitment to Welcoming and Celebrating All,” hosted by the Denver Immigrant & Refugee Commission.

“In Denver, we stand firmly for the ideals of inclusion, acceptance and opportunity,” Mayor Hancock said. “These are our values. And the individuals and organizations we’re honoring with these awards are proof that we will continue to work together against hate and will not allow it to divide us or our city.”

The 2017 Mayor’s Diversity and Inclusion Award winners are:

Denver African American Commission

Families Forward Resource Center – Recognizing that African American families experience exponentially higher rates of infant mortality than any other culture, Families Forward Resource Center in Denver provides access to resources including health care, parenting education and family advocacy that help to ensure African American babies and families are healthy and thriving.

Denver Commission on Aging

Jayla Sanchez-Warren – Sanchez-Warren is known for her advocacy on behalf of Denver’s aging population, including work to develop the regional Plan on Aging. A number of Denver programs are a result of her 26 years of service in areas such as transportation access, veterans directed, home and community-based services, complex case management, elder refugee services and long-term care.

Denver American Indian Commission

Northern Colorado UNITY Group – The Northern Colorado UNITY group led the organization of a 2016 forum to discuss the harmful psychological effects of Native American mascots that was believed to be the first of its kind in the United States put on entirely by Native American youth. The group also served on the governor’s Commission to Study American Indian Representation in Public Schools and continues to advocate for local students.

Denver Asian American Pacific Islander Commission

Justin Valas – Apart from his many policy and advocacy roles, Valas maintains a deep connection to the local AAPI community and consistently works to increase awareness of AAPI issues. With a focus on economic justice and immigrant rights, his ability to find intersectionality and bring AAPIs to the forefront of conversations without minimizing others epitomizes this year’s awards theme.
Street Fraternity – The nonprofit Street Fraternity, “a place of brotherhood and personal growth for urban young men,” many from immigrant and refugee communities, helps participants identify opportunities, challenges and goals, and develop into positive young men. Drop-in hours provide a safe space with computers and library as well as activities such as preparing and serving meals every night, music production and lyric-writing classes.

Denver LGBTQ Commission
Denise Whinnen – As director for Colorado Strategies at Gill Foundation, Whinnen has served countless LGBTQ organizations and causes in Denver and across Colorado since 2005, helping make the state’s LGBTQ equality movement smarter, more nimble and more effective. She links people and organizations with assets to build opportunity, drive innovation, take risks and solve challenges.

Denver Latino Commission
Dr. Stephen M. Jordan – During his 12-year tenure as president of Metropolitan State University of Denver, Dr. Jordan displayed courageous leadership in creating a nonresident tuition rate for Colorado’s undocumented students that heralded the passage of the Colorado ASSET bill. He initiated improvements in retention and graduation rates and worked toward MSU becoming a Hispanic Serving Institution, which doubled Latino enrollment.

Denver Commission for People with Disabilities
Heidi Heissenbutel – As the executive director of Sewall Child Development Center and Dahlia Center, Heissenbutel oversees a program that customizes the learning experiences of every student regardless of ability level or ethnic, linguistic or economic background and aligns with the spirit of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which allows children to be educated in the least restrictive environment with appropriate aides and services.

Denver Women’s Commission
The Writing Center at Manual High School with Olivia Jones, in memory of student co-founder Mardale Jay – The Writing Center at Manual High School, the first student-led writing center in the nation, strives to be a place where students work together to develop the skills and confidence they need to reclaim the power of voice and become powerful agents of social change. The center empowers students to become authors of their own learning and to construct their own knowledge.

Denver Immigrant and Refugee Commission
Place Bridge Academy – More than 60 different languages and over 40 countries are represented at this DPS magnet school for ECE-8th grade refugee students where all students receive a standards-based education that leverages English-language development and the ability to access rigorous academic content, as well as support in the social/emotional skills necessary to develop a world view and be successful in a diverse American society.

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