

CU Tribute Honors 5 For Years of Caring

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Body

Another class of paragons of community service will be **honored** next week at Catholic University's 18th annual "Thanksgiving Tuesday" celebration.

This year's **tribute**, designed to thank people who have made a real difference in the city, goes to a group including a nun who has helped the city's growing community of Hispanic immigrants; a former lawyer for Congress who rebounded from alcoholism to found groups homes to help other alcoholics; a former corporate accountant now building affordable housing; and a leader in an organization of black men that helps black city youth.

The awards ceremony, at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Hartke Theatre on Harewood Road NE at the university, is open to the public.

The honorees:

Sister Manuela Vencela, 69, has spent her life devoted to others. Vencela, a native of Spain, came to Washington as a young woman with the Carmelite Sisters of Charity and today lives and works in Mount Pleasant, tending to the poor and the infirm in Our Lady Queen of the Americas parish.

In 1977, in cooperation with the Spanish Catholic Center in upper Northwest, she founded an organization that offers training and support for domestic workers from foreign countries working in the District.

But her mission in recent years has been working with undocumented and documented immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Chile and Peru -- a service fueled by a deep spiritual commitment to helping others.

"I love it," Vencela said. "When you are giving yourself for the Lord to others, it's a joy. You're not working for money. You find more joy in giving than receiving."

J. Paul Molloy is chief executive officer and co-founder of Oxford House Inc., a chain of about 300 group homes in 30 states that are run and supported by recovering alcoholics and drug addicts.

The 53-year-old Molloy hit rock bottom in 1973, when his life spun out of control after years of drinking. At the time, he was the Republican counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee.

His wife filed for divorce and committed him to a psychiatric ward of a local hospital. Checking out after seven months, Molloy lived in a seedy downtown hotel and wandered the streets.

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Finally, after a Montgomery County halfway house he was living in was closed, he helped found the first Oxford House private group home, and his life changed forever.

First, he resumed practicing law, then in 1989 he shifted full-time to expanding Oxford House, which has become a successful program with an 8 percent relapse rate among residents.

He has since remarried his wife.

For D.C. resident Brandon Johnson, 36, community service is a driving force in life.

An Antioch law school graduate and former aide to U.S. Rep. Augustus Hawkins, Johnson works as a tutor at the PLAN adult literacy center on Capitol Hill and in Anacostia.

He also is an officer of Concerned Black Men, which works to build self-esteem among black youth.

"Volunteers are a very important part of our community," Johnson said. "When people say there's not enough money to do things, volunteers help to fill in some of the spaces."

After years in the business world as an accountant, 66-year-old John William Branner began getting involved in social service work through his role as business manager of the Church of the Saviour, an ecumenical church near Dupont Circle.

Since 1973, Branner has served as president of Jubilee Housing in Adams-Morgan, a prominent builder and advocacy group for low- and moderate-income housing.

Branner, who lives in Alexandria, also is a board member of Columbia Road Health Services, Christ House medical shelter for the homeless and the Free The Children college scholarship program.

The Rev. Monsignor John G. Kuhn, began his service more than three decades ago. As a newly ordained clergyman in 1958, Kuhn was so moved by the bleakness of city life for the mentally and emotionally ill that he organized a small group of volunteers who opened their homes to provide social and recreational activities for these people.

In 1964, the volunteers opened a full-fledged social club for the mentally ill called the Anchor Club near Catholic University. Today, Kuhn heads Anchor Mental Health Associates, which operates a network of group homes, work training centers and social clubs for the mentally ill.

Kuhn grew up in the Brookland neighborhood of Washington.

Graphic

PHOTO, SISTER MANUELA VENCELA

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