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Rotarian's work for homeless honored

Citizen of the year award to be given

By Alicia Doyle
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A 30-year Rotary member and recipient of multiple Rotarian of the Year awards, Karl Keller, 70, is also a professional musician who plays clarinet, sax, flute and piccolo with his group, Sax and the City.

But it's his organizational and visionary work with a task force to end homelessness that earned Keller a Citizen of the Year Poinsettia Award from the Ventura Chamber of Commerce, which honors those who make a difference in the community.

"It's humbling," said Keller, the volunteer chair of the Ventura Social Services Task Force, dedicated to ending homelessness in Ventura. Keller will be honored during a ceremony at 11.30 a.m. today at the Marriott Beach Hotel in Ventura.

"I've simply been following the natural path in front of me," said Keller, who is also on the board of directors of the city's homeless project at River Haven. "The results I'm proud of are actually the sum of the efforts of many other inspired people working together."

Keller's enthusiasm for assisting those less fortunate, his grasp of the complexity of the issues surrounding homelessness, and his ability to convene a diverse group of residents to work together have been important to the task force's success, said Cathy Brudnicki of the Ventura County Housing and Homeless Coalition. She met Keller about five years ago when he started working with the task force.

"He is an example of the impact a single person can have on a complex social issue ... our community has benefited from his efforts, and I am delighted that he is receiving recognition for all his hard work," Brudnicki said.

Keller inspires by his actions and deeds, said Harold Cartlidge, a member of Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura, where Keller is also a member.

"As a talented saxophone and clarinet player, he has been entertaining the public as a working musician," Cartlidge said.

Keller plays with his band, as well as others, throughout Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

"He also donates his musical talents for benefit events at places such as the Ventura Towne House seniors home, and churches."

Chairman of task force

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Keller has made a difference leading by example, said Evie Greene, who met Keller when she joined Rotary Club of Westlake Village Sunrise five years ago.

"He finds a need and finds a way to meet that need, all the time doing it quietly, behind the scenes, no fanfare," Greene said.

Three years ago, Keller assumed a leading role on the task force.

"We were right then in the midst of formulating a new plan of action to deal with homeless issues, not just within the city of Ventura but across the county and the nation, and there were about 50 to 60 local people meeting and grappling with how to do something useful," Ventura Councilman Neal Andrews said. He is a council liaison to the task force and nominated Keller for the Citizen of the Year Award.

Occasionally, the group would grow to as many as 600 people. Keller saw it as an opportunity to mobilize a larger contingent and accepted the position of chairman of the task force, Andrews said.

'A Herculean effort'

In 2004, the city designated the task force as the community organization that it would look to for advice and guidance on issues of the homeless.

"I'm certain that Karl never quite understood all that would be required of him as the volunteer chair of that effort," Andrews said in his nomination form, "but he has put in a Herculean effort, devoting literally hundreds of hours of time, providing the seasoned and professional leadership gained as a talented business manager throughout his many years in the business sector."

Keller holds an MBA from the University of Chicago.

Because of his leadership, Andrews said, the task force has emerged as a leading force with participation from every social service and public agency in Ventura, dozens of churches, neighborhood councils, service clubs, policymakers and scores of volunteers.

Keller said he's been honored to chair the task force for 2 1/2 years.

"It's rewarding to see the progress made by the many people devoted to ending homelessness in the city and county," he said.

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