

Celebrity journalist Joan Lunden honored by DVCC

Posted on 05/14/2009
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STAMFORD -- For nearly 20 years, Joan Lunden, the former host of "Good Morning America," helped American families start each day with useful information to better their lives.

As a mother of seven, Lunden put special emphasis on initiatives aimed at families with children, and on Thursday afternoon, the former early morning television personality was honored for her work in this area.

In her address, the award-winning journalist Lunden spoke of her experiences to a crowd of nearly 600 packed inside the grand ballroom of the Stamford Marriott Hotel for the Domestic Violence Crisis Center's seventh annual People of Courage luncheon.



Photo/Alex von Kleydorff. Linda Fairstein the first recipient of the Woman of Courage award is joined by the 2009 honoree Joan Lunden at the award ceremony in Stamford.

"The issue of domestic violence has been in the closet for too many years," said Lunden.

Gesturing toward the DVCC staff, who service seven communities in lower Fairfield County, Lunden said the subject has finally made its way into the conscious of the American public.

"This is the kind of army we need," she said. "An army of believers, and an army of compassion."

Linda Fairstein, the DVCC's first honoree six years ago, said the sheer size of the 2009 luncheon shows how far the cause has come.

"That first year, you could have fit the entire crowd in the corner of this room," said Fairstein, a former prosecutor turned best-selling crime novelist. The hundreds in attendance and the millions of dollars raised to help families and children at risk, "speaks to this organization and all that its accomplished," she said.

The agency, which has offices in Norwalk and Stamford, offers free and confidential services, including court and legal help, group and individual counseling, temporary shelter, housing services, children's services, medical advocacy, multilingual services, educational projects and a 24-hour hotline.

Last year, the agency serviced 4,016 victims of domestic violence through its various programs, said Rachelle Kucera Mehra, executive director of the DVCC.

"Still, Connecticut represents the bottom of the barrel when it comes to funding for the cause," she said.

Despite its vast wealth, Connecticut remains one of five states in the country that does not fund around-the-clock staffing at domestic violence shelters, said Agnes Maldonado, executive director of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

The CCADV has been urging the Connecticut legislature for the last seven years to fund 24/7 coverage, but has yet to push a bill through the state.

Individual and corporate donations remain strong, said Kucera Mehra, and that's partly due the exposure domestic violence gets through its high-profile spokespeople.

"Domestic violence is an issue that I am very passionate about," said Lunden. "This state need to make some changes in terms of funding. By putting my support behind the DVCC, I'm hopeful they can help create those changes."