

Bank recognizes local leaders

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STAMFORD -- Bank of America honored five Local Heroes, four Student Leaders and two Neighborhood Builders for their service to the Fairfield County community at its Neighborhood Excellence Initiative Awards Monday night.

The overall theme at the 4th annual event at the [Palace Theatre](#) was leadership -- acknowledging those who show it and encouraging others to develop it.

Local Heroes James Lacerneza, of Stamford; [Edna Miller](#), of Fairfield; [Ginger Katz](#), of Norwalk; [Claudette Tallon](#), of Darien; and Bridgeport Police Lt. [David Daniels](#) were given \$5,000 for the charity of their choice. Student Leaders Grace Altamura, [Abdul Qadri](#) and [Kevin Kendall](#), of Stamford, and Motun Bolumole, of Bridgeport, participated in paid summer internships with local nonprofits and spent a week in Washington, D.C., at the Student Leadership Summit.

The two organizations recognized as Neighborhood Builders, the [Housing Development Fund](#) in Stamford and the Thomas Merton Campus in Bridgeport, received \$200,000 in unrestricted funding.

"This is one of my favorite evenings because we get to talk about such great things," said [Joseph Gianni](#), Bank of America's regional executive for corporate responsibility efforts. "We're establishing the leaders of the future for the not-for-profit organizations."

A local committee composed of bank representatives and members of the community selects each year's honorees.

"While there's corporate commitment to the program, the decision is all done locally," said Gianni. "The dollars that they win are all used for unstructured grants to the organization. In these tough times, having unrestricted dollars come into your organization is a big benefit."

Joan Carty, president and CEO of the Housing Development Fund, expressed her gratitude for the grant.

"It's a tremendous honor and we are very, very excited to be a recipient. This is a grant of substantial size, the largest we've ever gotten. It's going to have all kinds of ripple effects," she said.

The programs at the Housing Development Fund involve home-ownership counseling, down-payment assistance and foreclosure-intervention counseling. The fund has helped more than 1,100 families afford homes and 300 to 400 families avoid foreclosure, it reported.

"We plan to use it to continue with our counseling work," said Carty. "It's a tremendous gift."

The students honored at the event each arrived with an entourage of proud family members, teachers and mentors.

Jeanie Melfi-Smith, a teacher in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program at [Westhill High School](#), came on behalf of Abdul Qadri, who graduated from Westhill and attends [Sacred Heart University](#).

"Abdul was my student for four years. He's an outstanding young man, just very bright, all around nice young man, outgoing, well-rounded. I'm very proud," Melfi-Smith said.

adding that she feels like her AVID students are her own children. "I'm sort of like a proud mom at this point."

Robert Augustyn, a guidance counselor at [Stamford High School](#), which Grace Altamura attends as a senior, has been a longtime friend of the family.

"I got a chance to know her," Augustyn said of Grace. "It's amazing how totally immersed these kids are in community involvement and volunteer service and still maintain high academic standards."

During the event, each of the honorees spoke to a crowd of supporters, thanking friends and family and outlining their commitment to charitable service.

Motun Bolumole, who interned at the [Cardinal Shehan Center](#) in Bridgeport, summed up the sentiments of the recipients.

"Each one of us, we look at America, we look at the world, and we ask ourselves, how can we help?"