

United Way honors 'Spirit of Caring'

By MEG BARONE
Correspondent

BRIDGEPORT — There was no red carpet at The Klein Thursday to greet United Way of Eastern Fairfield County award recipients; just an archway of blue and yellow balloons.

There was no paparazzi mob; just a lone photographer on stage to record the ceremony.

There was, however, a great deal of gratitude and respect from community leaders and proud families of the 26 2004 Spirit of Caring and Community Builder honorees, six of whom are high school students.

"Welcome to the fourth annual Academy Awards of Goodwill," said Merle Berke-Schlessel, president and chief professional officer of the United Way of Eastern Fairfield County.

Berke-Schlessel said the award winners exemplify the mission of the United Way, offering hope, help, caring and compassion, and representing the best of humanity.

"I wasn't expecting to get any awards or accolades. I'm just trying to give back to my community. It's very rewarding," said Reginald Jackson, of Milford, who serves on the board of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Southwestern Connecticut.

"I've been fortunate and



Andrea A. Dixon/Connecticut Post

Honored volunteers: United Way Spirit of Caring award winners at The Klein in Bridgeport Thursday are, clockwise from bottom left, from the Pro Bono Partnership: Director of Development Lisa Rosepbloom, Deputy Director Mo Segall, Executive Director Rick Hoblish; Community Builder award, ABCD Board of Directors member Cyndy Foothorap; Spirit of Caring award, ABCD Director of Early Headstart and Health Margie Powell; Community Builder award, United Visiting Nurse Association board member Virginia Hayes; and Barbara Johnson, of People's Bank, for John Klein, winner of the Norman Leeds Award.

blessed. I have a good life. I have to share that with people less fortunate. I chose to work with kids," Jackson said.

Ali Jihad Langston, 18, of Bridgeport, works with his peers. Langston, a student at

Weston High School, was nominated by the Charles D. Smith, Jr. Foundation for creating a nonprofit organization with three other Weston students called Tools 4 Schools.

"I have been so lucky in life I

have to give back," said Beverly Peterson, of Trumbull, who has provided one-on-one basic literacy tutoring and taught English as a second language classes for Literacy Volunteers for five years.

Toni Zeleny, president of the Bridgeport Hospital Auxiliary, accepted her award on behalf of all the people who donate time to the hospital.

Frederick K. Biebel, 78, of Stratford, was honored for his three years of volunteerism at the Kennedy Center, where he serves on the board of directors and works on the annual dinner program.

John A. Klein, president and CEO of People's Bank, was unable to attend to receive the Norman Leeds Award as volunteer of the year: Barbara Johnson, senior vice president/community relations, accepted the award on his behalf.

Johnson said Klein was recognized for "his leadership in continuing the corporate commitment to the United Way and for championing the Success By Six program," which helps children prepare for school.

Also honored with the Spirit of Caring Awards were children's advocate Margie Powell and the Pro Bono Partnership, which offers free legal services to area nonprofit organizations.