

Columbia named one of 100 best communities for young people

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BY Laura Kebede

COLUMBIA—The community's aim to achieve and sustain a family-friendly city has garnered national attention.

For the first time, Columbia earned the designation as one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People and celebrated the success in front of City Hall on Tuesday.

The America's Promise Alliance and financial planning company ING chose communities "most dedicated to helping local youth graduate from high school," according to the alliance's website. Thirty of the winning communities were first-time recipients.

The Youth Community Coalition gave Georgalu Swoboda of Big Brothers and Big Sisters and Phil Steinhaus of the Columbia Housing Authority the Hero for Youth Award at the celebration for their commitment to Columbia's youth.

The president and CEO of the alliance, Marguerite Kondracke, and the president of ING Foundation, Rhonda Mims, led the 20-member panel that considered 350 applications nationwide.

Factors for recognition were based on certain developmental resources, or the Five Promises:

1. Caring adults
2. Safe places
3. A healthy start
4. Effective education
5. Opportunities to help others

Some of the local programs Kondracke recognized as key to fulfilling the Five Promises are:

- Youth Community Coalition (YC2)
- Parents as Teachers
- Walking School Bus
- Basic Needs Coalition

"This year was the most diverse and competitive in the history of the competition," Caroline Brachman, representative of the alliance, said during the community celebration. "Columbia is helping the nation get closer to the goal of ending the drop-out crisis."

Interested communities had to demonstrate that every sector of the community is involved in the improvement of graduation rates and keeping the Five Promises. The competition opened in the spring. By September, the top 100 were announced on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

During the community celebration Tuesday, Tiffany Bouldin, mother of 6-year-old Jayla Greer, echoed the alliance's findings.

"Columbia is a great place to raise children," she said.

Fifth Ward Councilwoman Laura Nauser also praised the recognition.

"This is a great accomplishment for the community," she said.

One of the next steps the city will take to encourage youth involvement, Nauser said, is the Teen Town Hall to be held from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Oct. 19 at City Hall. The meeting is meant to engage youth in the public discussion about crime by allowing youth to come up with songs and poetry to express their thoughts.

Ryan Worley, coordinator of YC2, closed the celebration with a challenge to adults to get involved with the community's efforts to empower youth.

"What is going to be your next step?" he said.