

‘Rudy’ shares story at YMCA dinner

Notre Dame walk-on, motivational speaker receives standing ovation

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DeKALB – Joliet native Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger, 69, is well-known for being the former Notre Dame Fighting Irish walk-on football player with a brief career that was dramatized in the 1993 film “Rudy.”

During the Y Community Awards dinner Thursday evening hosted by the Kishwaukee Family YMCA, Ruettiger got a standing ovation after he talked about how he achieved his dream of playing football for the university in Indiana and taking 10 years to fully realize his dream of making his experience into a movie, despite academic struggles throughout his life with having dyslexia and being told that he couldn’t reach his goals.

And, Ruettiger said, that message holds true for all walks of life.

“Everybody’s a Rudy,” Ruettiger said. “Everybody has a Rudy inside of them; they just have to bring it out.”

Ruettiger said he has toured all over to not only share his story of taking 20 years to play football for 27 seconds, but to urge people to start putting a larger emphasis on character and culture as the key to success.

In his speech, Ruettiger, a Navy veteran during the Vietnam War, talked about how he always had to fold laundry and make beds as a consequence for bringing home low grades on a report card while he was growing up. He said having those skill sets benefited him in the long run when he was asked whether he could perform those tasks while enlisting in the Navy.

“If you can fold underwear, you can do anything,” Ruettiger said in his speech.

Debbie Madeley, the development director for the Kishwaukee Family YMCA, said Ruettiger was chosen to be the guest speaker for this year’s dinner at Faranda’s Banquet Center, 302 Grove St., because his message and overall school of thought mirror the spirit and values of the organization, which is transforming lives with an inclusive and encouraging culture.

“That’s the same thing that people at the Y do every day,” Madeley said.

Before Ruettiger delivered his speech at the dinner, awards were given to honor a teenager who has made notable contributions to improving their com-



Photos by Steve Bittinger for Shaw Media

Karen Pletsch (right) receives the 2018 Outstanding Community Leader Award on Thursday at the Y Community Awards dinner in DeKalb.

munity, a young adult in their 20s, 30s or 40s who has made significant and continuous volunteer contributions to DeKalb County, and an outstanding individual whose volunteerism has advanced the county. The Youth Leader, Emerging Leader and Outstanding Community Leader awards were given to Sycamore High School student Alison Coovert, OC Creative president Brian Oster and recently retired DeKalb Daily Chronicle publisher Karen Pletsch, respectively.

Pletsch, who was nominated for the award by DeKalb Mayor Jerry Smith, said she worked with many community leaders during her decades of volunteer experience with DeKalb County organizations, including Tails Humane Society, Hope Haven, Family Service Agency and the Kishwaukee Family YMCA. She said she was “very honored” to be named as an outstanding community leader and that there also are so many other community



Brian Oster of OC Creative receives the 2018 Emerging Leader Award on Thursday at the Y Community Awards dinner in DeKalb.

members who should be recognized for their volunteer contributions.

“We do this because this is the right thing for us to do,” Pletsch said.

Oster has served as the chairman of DeKalb Chamber of Commerce and Family Service Agency Board of Direc-

tors and also was on the board for Adventure Works and the Proudly DeKalb committee. He said he moved to the area seven years ago for the community that wanted to change and grow, and he, too, was “completely humbled” to be nominated for the emerging leader award by Smith.

“I didn’t have to be a townie to be accepted,” Oster said. “And that was wonderful.”

Ruettiger, who has been a motivational speaker for 25 years, said people receive the accolades they do because they have good character and are able to handle obstacles gracefully. He said everyone wants to feel good about who they are and what they want to achieve – and hope, collaboration and helping others win are the keys to overall success, he said.

“That’s basically why I do it,” Ruettiger said. “To have people believe that they can become what they believe in.”