

Living & Leisure



Bob Ellis/staff photographer

Christella Yonta is winner of the 2015 John B. Bennett Public Health Award, for her outstanding contributions in the health field. It was presented to her at the Cortland County Board of Health meeting Tuesday.

Yonta's wellness work gets notice

Winner of 2015 John B. Bennett Health Award

By KATIE KEYSER
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Christella Yonta said she grew up volunteering, watching her parents who had a legacy of community spirit.

"I think I learned about civic engagement by their example. You always volunteered — or stepped up. You do what you can. I can't remember not volunteering," she said.

Yonta, 47, a project coordinator for the Healthy NOW program at Seven Valleys Health Coalition, received the 2015 John B. Bennett Public Health Award Tuesday.

The honor is for a long and distinguished service in the advancement of public health in Cortland County.

It was named for John B. Bennett, who served on the county Board of Health from 1949 to 1976, many of those years as president or vice president, according to a news release from Barry Batzing, president of the Cortland County Board of Health.

"I'm surprised," Yonta said after Tuesday's Board of Health meeting in the County Office Building. "I'm appreciative because I know the history of the John Bennett Public Health Award. A couple of the previous honorees I have known: Charlie Poskanzer — his research was used for the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid ... and Dr. Stuart Gillim. I know I am in good company."

The award was given to Gillim in 2011, said Batzing. Before that it was issued in 1998. It's not an annual distinction, he said.

The board sought nominations from around 12 entities this year and Yonta's was the only name that came back, from Jeanette Diplo, Batzing said.

"I do a lot of volunteer work," said Diplo, retired Cortland High health teacher and an adjunct health teacher at SUNY Cortland. "Everywhere I go, Christella is there."

Yonta doesn't turn off the job when she walks out the door, said Diplo. "She really believes it, lives it, endorses it. She does it from the bottom of her heart," she said.

In her SVHC job, Yonta has worked to establish neighborhood walking trails, community gardens, and safe transportation polices. She's promoted healthy eating by making fruits and vegetables visible in convenience stores. She's helped administer a five county diabetes prevention program. She has been a researcher for the Cortland Counts annual community assessment.

Jackie Carlton Leaf, executive director of SVHC, has known Yonta for the ten years she's worked at SVHC.

"She's very ingrained in the community," Leaf said. "She's very involved on a personal level, as well as having a professional desire for health and wellness ... She's a go getter."

Leaf said Yonta has the ability to work with people and bring people together. She knows everyone and is more the face of SVHC than she is, since Leaf is behind the desk more. Plus, Yonta is organized.

Leaf will walk into her office and see handouts neatly collated and in piles, tools or items for projects bagged up in rows,

ready to go ten days before an event.

Yonta, married with two children, is also a member of several community boards. She's a community impact task force member for United Way, a member of the county Traffic Safety Board, chairman of the city Bike and Pedestrian Committee and a member of the CAPCO Policy Council.

She's also been involved with Leadership Cortland, the YMCA, the Cortland Child Development Center and Cornell Cooperative Extension, to name a few.

Denise Hall, St. Mary's School principal, said Yonta encouraged staff to be a healthy model for students, coming up with incentives and games to get staff to make healthy choices.

"She also started a fruit cart so the children had a healthy alternative to the ice cream and snacks in the lunch program. She came up with most of the funding, organized volunteers and did most of the work herself," said Hall.

Yonta said she likes working on projects that help people — "Hearing from people what the needs are and being able to implement something that helps them. People that have had an obesity problem or problem with diabetes, needing to be able to walk and exercise, and implementing trails," she said.

Before working a SVHC, she worked for five years at the Cortland County Health Department and was an athletic trainer for Tully High School. She was also a rehabilitation aide in the Physical Therapy Department at Cortland Regional Medical Center.

Yonta said she tends to be a worker bee. "I am more comfortable doing things — what needs to be done — and doing it."