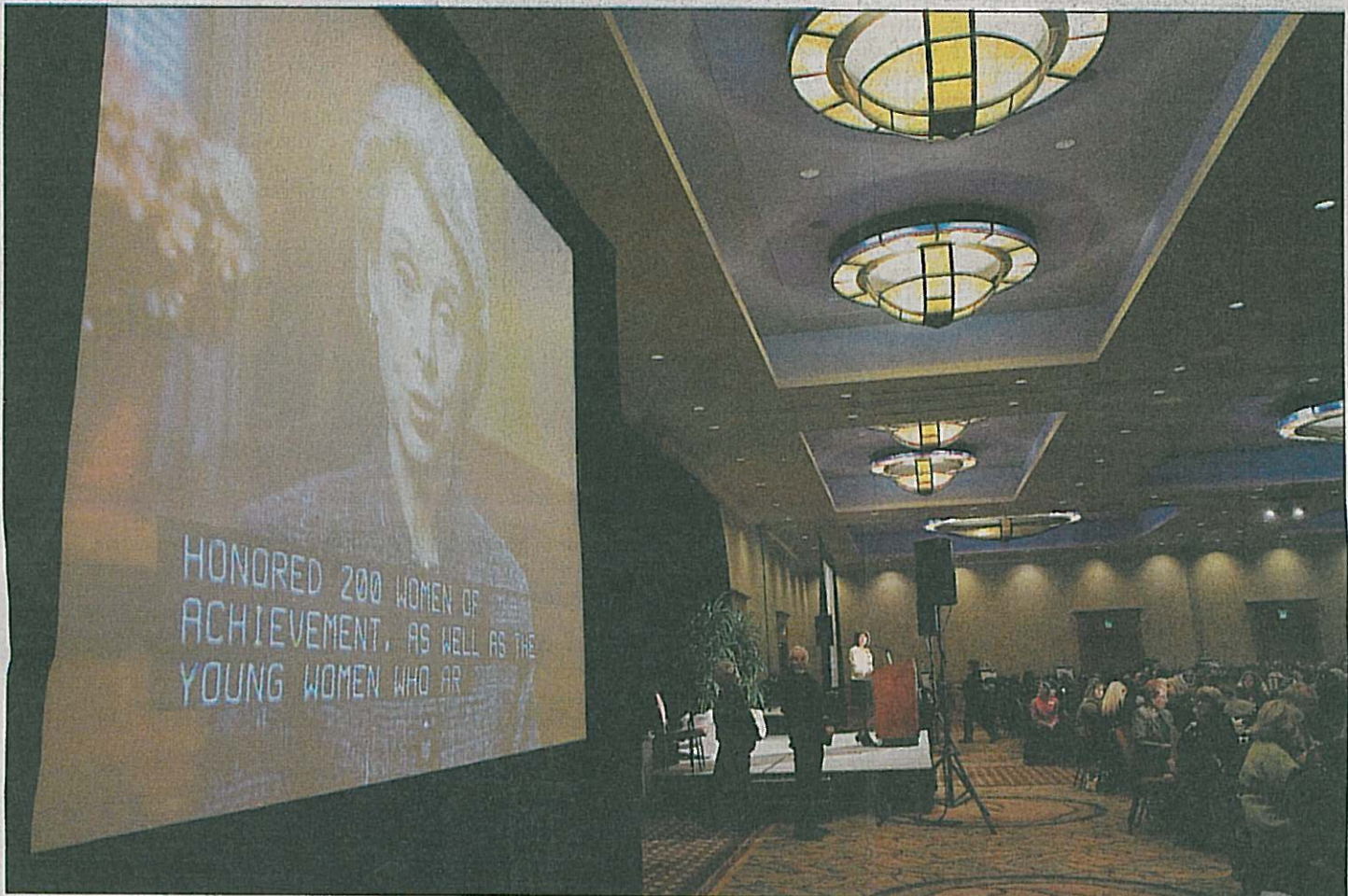


Debra Jenkins, a Women of Achievement honoree, draws a laugh as she talks about lessons she learned from her grandmother.



25 years – and counting – of inspiring women



TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire congratulates honorees of the 25th annual Women of Achievement Awards via a taped address during a ceremony Monday at the Hilton Vancouver Washington.

Founder: Struggles that launched achievement honors still exist

By **CRAIG BROWN**
Columbian staff writer

It was 25 years ago when Pat Watne, director of women's programs at Clark College, hatched an idea: Honor local women who have achieved high goals, in the hope of inspiring the women she saw struggling to balance classes, jobs and families.

That first event, in 1985, consisted of a photography exhibit and a tea honoring eight local women. It was a great success.

Today, the annual Women of Achievement event is the largest of its kind in Southwest Washington. More than 600 people gathered Monday at the Hilton Vancouver Washington to honor eight more women of achievement and three young women of achievement.

That brings to 200 the total number of women honored over the years, said Watne, who added that the struggle she saw then continues today. Despite federal legislation, women's contributions continue to be undervalued by society, she said. A

pay gap persists, with women on average earning only 77 percent of the pay brought home by men with similar skills. For members of minority groups, the gap is worse, she said.

"Let us continue to highlight women's contributions in Clark County and encourage each other to do our best," she said.

Encouragement and struggle was a common theme as the honorees related their stories.

Jeanne Firstenburg, vice president and chief operating officer of First Independent Bank, recalled a dark time in her life. She was a newly single mother, a victim of domestic violence, and lacking a college education.

"If adversity builds character, then I was

quite a character," said Firstenburg, who recounted how her children supported her college dream even as she worked four jobs at once to support the family. Eventually, she got that college degree and a good job as a bank auditor. It was there she met her current husband, First Indy Chairman Bill Firstenburg.

In addition to their careers at the bank, the Firstenburgs are well-known as philanthropists. The family and the bank have contributed \$25 million to charitable causes in the past few years. In addition, Jeanne Firstenburg volunteers on behalf of health care, higher education and women's programs.

"I could never give back as much as I have been given," Firstenburg said. "I have finally found a place to call home."

Another honoree, Clark College psychology professor Debra Jenkins, drew a laugh when she recalled the big mission her grandmother gave her as a small child: To



On the
Web
www.columbian.com

Online video: Meet the Young Women of Achievement at www.columbian.com/multimedia



TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

KGW-TV anchor Laural Porter turns to recognize Young Women of Achievement honorees during the annual Women of Achievement program Monday at the Hilton Vancouver Washington. Porter emceed the event.

Achievement:

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leave something of accomplishment on the Earth every day. In addition to her work at Clark, she was honored as an advocate for social justice, a passion she said can be a lonely road. "I do what I do because I love it," she said.

Also honored as Women of Achievement were volunteer programs manager Bobbi Casanova; WSU Vancouver accounting professor and administrator Jane Cote; Port of Vancouver executive Addison Jacobs; entrepreneur and volunteer Terry Murphy; lawyer/consultant Carol Parker Walsh; and state Rep.

Deb Wallace, D-Vancouver. All eight were presented with handmade glass plates.

Young Women of Achievement honorees were Sarah Cole, Battle Ground High School; Stephanie Nicholson, Camas High School; and Alexa Ortiz, Skyview High School. Each receives a \$1,500 scholarship.

Five girls received Community Service Awards. They are Kellie Howard, Prairie High School; Savannah Larson, Columbia River High School; Lacey Matzdorff, La Center High School; Alissa Stavig, Hockinson High School; and Connie Zheng, Mountain View High School. They received certificates.

The event is sponsored by Clark College and YWCA Clark County.