

Betty Ford Honored With Hillman Award



Steve Ford accepts Hillman Award on behalf of Betty Ford.

"Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a place from which someone could journey far, but never leave," is a quote attributed to James Cannon, author and long-time friend of President Gerald R. Ford and former First Lady Betty Ford. Decades after she last lived in Grand Rapids, Betty was honored by West Michigan's health care community for her contributions to advocacy and action in health care.

At its "Blue Moon @ High Noon" event, the Alliance for Health presented Betty with its Hillman Award, named in memory of U.S. District Judge Douglas W. Hillman, a life-long community health care advocate.

"The Hillman award annually recognizes people who have truly made a difference in the quality of health care in West Michigan," said Lody Zwarenstejn, President of the Alliance for Health. "This year, we honored one of our community's most distinguished and inspirational leaders. Through Mrs. Ford's courage, advocacy and activism, the nation changed the way it views, talks about and cares for disease – specifically breast cancer and addiction. West Michigan is incredibly fortunate to be a beneficiary of her ground-breaking vision."

The award lunch, held Sept. 22, 2010, at the JW Marriott in Grand Rapids, featured a tribute video to Betty introduced by Marty Allen, Chairman Emeritus and lifetime Trustee of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential

Foundation after serving as its Chairman for more than 20 years. "When asked about her candor and openness," said Allen, "Betty Ford explained that it was her Midwest upbringing that shaped her values and character, throughout her formative years in Grand Rapids."

"Simply put, the Hillman Award recognizes visionaries, and such a person was Betty Ford," said Jen VanSkiver, chair of the board for the Alliance for Health. "Her health care struggles became what parents like myself call 'teachable moments,'" said VanSkiver. "She met her health challenges head on, and then she continued the fight long past her personal victories so that she could help others achieve the same success."

"To accept this award for her service, for how she took two of the darkest days of her life and had something good come out of them on the other side, it's an amazing story. We're so proud of mom," said Steve Ford.

"I'll never forget my parents standing on the front lawn of the White House, holding hands, and saying we're going to take the stigma off this disease," said Steve about the Fords' announcement in 1974 that Betty had been diagnosed with breast cancer. "At that point, breast cancer was a closet disease. They didn't talk about it, and here the First Lady of the country was going to be transparent and show that women didn't

need to be ashamed of this," said Steve.

Betty Ford helped establish the Betty Ford Breast Care Services in Grand Rapids, including the Betty Ford Diagnostic Breast Center at Spectrum Health's Lemmen-Holton Cancer Pavilion. Each year, Betty Ford Breast Care Services performs 50,000 mammograms, 45,000 computer-aided detections, nearly 2,000 minimally invasive biopsies, and about 9,000 other diagnostic procedures.

"Personally speaking, from the perspective of a teenage daughter 20 years ago whose mother was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer, detected by a mammogram at Betty Ford, I can't express how grateful I am, how grateful we all are who share similar stories, for this gift in our community," said VanSkiver.

After her recovery from her addictions, Betty helped create the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif., providing treatment and counseling to those suffering from dependency on drugs and/or alcohol. More than 90,000 men and women have been assisted through that center since 1982.

Steve recounted how his mother provided leadership to him when, 10 years after she became sober, he had to face his own alcoholism. At first, he said, her response was that he couldn't be an alcoholic. He had to remind her who she was. "Mom, wait a second, stop. You can't be in denial, you're 'Betty Ford,' you're the poster child for this thing."

"Thank you Betty," said VanSkiver. "Thank you for your courage. Thank you for speaking out. Thank you for your tireless efforts to help others face the health challenges you faced and to achieve the same victories you were able to achieve. And thank you for being a friend to this city and this region and contributing so richly to our health care services."

The Alliance for Health is a broad-based community coalition dedicated to the encouragement of optimal health for all residents through high-quality health care services at the lowest cost. The Alliance identifies and helps prioritize West Michigan's health issues, acts as a community catalyst, leads the community's discussions about the health industry, and works with various groups to solve community health issues.