Tribute Symposium Honors Six Local Women

By Jennifer Johnson Backer

The Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis paid tribute to six local women at a sold-out luncheon of more than 1,600 attendees on Friday, April 26.

The Legends Awards honor women whose work embodies the mission of the foundation – to support women and children throughout Shelby County.

In 2012, the foundation granted $616,000 to 31 programs that serve 16,000 women and children through economic and financial literacy, career and leadership development, advocacy and research, and technical support. The foundation has invested $14.3 million into the Memphis community since 1996.

“When it comes to leadership, the Women’s Foundation supports women every step of the way – from high school students to seasoned professionals,” said Ruby Bright, executive director of the foundation. “Strong women sustain the foundation and allow us to do the work of ending poverty in Memphis.”

As poverty has risen in the Memphis area, the role of the foundation has grown. About 22.9 percent of women living in Shelby County were below the poverty line in 2011, compared with 16.3 percent of women nationally, data from the U.S. Census Bureau show.

The 2013 annual Tribute Luncheon and Symposium on April 26 at Memphis Cook Convention Center honored Rosie Phillips Bingham, vice president of student affairs at the University of Memphis; Kathy Buckman Gibson, chairman at Buckman Laboratories International Inc.; Carolyn Chism Hardy, an entrepreneur and the founder of Hardy Bottling Co.; Hazel G. Moore, a civic leader, businesswoman and cosmetology professional affectionately known as “the Mayor of Whitehaven;” Barbara U. Prescott, executive director of PeopleFirst Partnership; and Rachel Shankman, senior director for Facing History and Ourselves.

Local artists and writers created unique works of art and prose to pay tribute to each honoree.

The luncheon’s keynote speaker, Shoshana Bean, who is known for her roles in the hits “Wicked” and “Hairspray,” spoke about her love for jazz and blues and her musical career. Bean told the crowd she has a special affection for Memphis because several members of her band are originally from the area. Bean was joined by Deborah Holmes, vice president of communications for the Global Fund for Women.

“What the foundation is doing is amazing,” Bean said. “What they are doing at the Stax Academy, the prep school, is unbelievable – what they are doing to preserve music history here is amazing. ... I personally am very passionate about keeping the arts in schools, because they are often the first thing to go.”
Bean said she agreed to come to Memphis to speak at the luncheon because of the city’s rich music history and her desire to inspire women and girls to achieve their goals.

Last year, one of the foundation’s largest beneficiaries was the University of Memphis Foundation for the Herff College of Engineering, which introduces young women to career opportunities in engineering. In 2012, the Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis granted $34,000 to the foundation.

WFGM also granted $20,000 to Community Legal Center, Memphis Area Legal Services, Karat Place Inc., Neighborhood Christian Centers Inc., Southwest Tennessee Community College Foundation, The Exchange Club Family Center and Latino Memphis.

Overall, the foundation granted $120,000 to nonprofits that support economic and financial literacy; $206,000 to groups that prepare women for careers; $67,000 to programs that foster leadership development; $57,000 to groups and programs that provide non-traditional job training; and $166,000 for advocacy, research and technical support.