

Article published Thursday, September 18, 2008  
OHIO WOMEN'S HALL OF FAME

## Advocate for seniors has a mission, not just a job

BLADE STAFF

Those who know Billie Johnson will tell you she's serious when she describes her work as a mission rather than just a job.

Ms. Johnson, president and chief executive officer of the Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, has spent most of her career advocating for and working with the elderly.

To recognize her dedication and service, she will be inducted today into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame.

She is one of two from northwest Ohio receiving the honor this year. The other is Joan Durgin, one of the founders and the development director of Polly Fox Academy, a school for pregnant teens and young mothers.

Ms. Johnson is being honored for her exhaustive work on behalf of the elderly. She helped create the Area Office on Aging and, during her more than 30 years there, can cite numerous accomplishments.

She helped start three housing complexes for low-income seniors, developed programs for grandparents raising their grandchildren, spearheaded a levy campaign to expand senior services, launched the SeniorNet program to help older adults learn how to navigate the Internet, and worked to develop a master plan to reuse the old Maumee Valley Hospital campus as a senior complex.

From an early age, Ms. Johnson learned how to appreciate older people. She was raised by her grandmother.

"She gave me my foundation, my values, my principles ... she taught me a lot about working with people."

She added, "People tend to think as you grow older, you have no more use in society. And I saw the opposite of that."

Ms. Johnson started helping the elderly in the early 1970s when she was asked by her employer, the Community Planning Council of United Way, to write a grant proposal to start programs and services in the community for the aging.

The state accepted the plan and Ms. Johnson was hired as an agency planner. She quickly rose to be the center's director in 1977, at only 29 years old.

As director, Ms. Johnson said she learned a valuable lesson early. During a meeting she had with commissioners in a rural county to ask for funding, each of the commissioners fell asleep, one by one.

"I thought, 'It's time to go home and rethink this,'" Ms. Johnson recalled.

She regrouped and met again with the commissioners, this time accompanied by a group of local religious leaders.

"Nobody went to sleep on me the second time," she said. "I realized at that point you cannot do things alone."

One of her biggest challenges? The constant loss of state and federal revenue for programs and services.



Billie Johnson says she was influenced by her grandmother, who raised her. 'People tend to think that as you grow older, you have no more use in society. And I saw the opposite of that.' She helped create the Area Office on Aging, and has spent 30 years adding to her accomplishments on behalf of seniors and others in need.  
( THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER )

That led her to spearhead the first campaign to get a senior citizens levy on the ballot in Lucas County. Voters first approved the levy in 1991 and approved it four more times.

The levy helps pay for meals and care for the home-bound, provide services for Alzheimer's patients, and expanded services at senior centers.

When she's not on the job, she enjoys spending time with her grandchildren, "doing the kinds of things my grandmother did with me," she said.

She also volunteers at the Toledo Zoo and with Zonta International, a service organization for women.

Ms. Johnson was nominated for the honor by her daughter, Rhonda Sewell.

"One day, I was in her office and we started to talk about the years that she has spent on the job," Ms. Sewell said. "And she started telling me about some of the amazing feats and hurdles she has had to cross by championing the cause of older Americans."

Ms. Sewell was inspired to nominate her mother. "Older Americans really mean a lot to her," she said. "She takes it to heart when someone doesn't have a place to live or can't get insurance."

Ms. Johnson said she's thrilled to receive the honor, but said she doesn't deserve all the credit.

"From the bottom of my heart, I know I couldn't have done this by myself," she said. "This is not my hands alone."

— Kate Giammarise