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NAACP's Lake County branch honored; 'The growth and the positive impact ... has been wonderful to see'

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Sandra Leconte, third from left, receives the **third-place plaque for the NAACP's Thalheimer Award** from **Leon Russell**, the **NAACP National Board Chair**, as **Karen Boykins-Townes**, far right, the **Vice Chair**, and **Teresa Haley**, **President of the Illinois NAACP Conference** watch. - Original Credit: News-Sun (Sandra Leconte/HANDOUT)

Becoming president of the Lake County Branch of the NAACP on Feb. 5, 2020 — just over a month before the coronavirus pandemic changed the way Americans lived — Sandra Leconte focused on helping the community cope.

Receiving more than \$500,000 in grants from the Illinois Public Health Association, Leconte and other members of the NAACP in Lake County energetically worked to help people, from getting vaccinated to getting food, to housing aid, to job help and more.

“We helped people with employment opportunities,” Leconte said. “We had food giveaways. People lost jobs. Lake County people needed help paying rent. We taught people about nutrition and healthy eating. We spent the money, and then got reimbursed.”

The response to COVID-19 and a host of other activities led to the NAACP Lake County Branch finishing third in the Thalheimer Award competition Sunday at the organization’s 114th annual convention in Boston, given to branches for superior achievement.

Though the Lake County branch is nearly 50 years old, Leconte is credited with its recent success. Eleanor Murkey is a lifetime member of the organization. She was the first dean of the College of Lake County’s Waukegan campus.

Murkey, who also chairs the board of Vista Medical Center East in Waukegan, said the COVID-19 response was a key factor in rejuvenating the NAACP in Lake County. Getting the grant was a significant achievement in itself.

“She has brought the NAACP back in a very strong way,” Murkey said. “It was no small task. They were some of the first to bring COVID testing. They really got out there and worked hard once they got the grant.”

Retired Waukegan Township Supervisor Patricia Jones, another lifetime NAACP member who first learned about the organization as a young girl from her father in Clarksdale, Mississippi, said Leconte gave support to those who needed it.

“Dr. Leconte has been a very strong voice for social justice in the community for a very long time,” Jones said. “She is a strong advocate for voter registration. She has worked hard to help the migrants in Lake County.”



Lauren Beth Gash of Highland Park, center, receives the Lake County NAACP Woman of the Month Award in June — she was named woman of the year in July — as, from the left, Sandra Leconte, Stella Jones, Virginia Tate and Stacey McNeely look on. - Original Credit: News-Sun (Sandra Leconte/HANDOUT)

Former state Rep. Lauren Beth Gash, D-Highland Park, the chair of the Lake County Democrats, said in an email she worked with the NAACP and Leconte on a variety of tasks over the years. The Lake County Branch named Gash its Woman of the Year.

“The growth and the positive impact of the Lake County Branch of the NAACP has been wonderful to see,” Gash said. “Sandra (Leconte) and the team have worked so hard to make a difference in the community and the results clearly show that.”

Among other accomplishments, Leconte said when there was discrimination against a member of the community, she would advocate on their behalf, whether it was before a local school board or Regional Office of Education in Lake County.

“We helped arrange settlements for people who were victims of discrimination,” Leconte said. “We were involved in legislating policymaking to create laws that will eliminate discrimination.”

When there were elections over the last few years, Leconte said the NAACP partnered with the League of Women Voters to hold candidate forums. The organization also provided backpacks with school supplies to children each August. Scholarships were given to graduating high school seniors.