

County Commission bestows medals on 7

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Herald Writer

In June 1994 on Interstate 10 in Tallahassee, Kateri Hilton's life was changed.

The Homestead resident and a friend were driving home from the airport when their car hit a tree. Hilton flew out of the car and into the pavement.

Surgery and rehabilitation therapy forced her to miss most of her senior year from high school. Paralyzed from the neck down, she still made up the work and graduated in 1995, on time and with honors.

Hilton, now studying psychology and religion at the University of Miami, is one of seven Miami-Dade residents honored this month by the County Commission with Medals of Merit.

The awards are given in the categories of achievement, civic service, education, heroism, leadership, people with disabilities and volunteerism.

Hilton, who won the award for people with disabilities, dedicates herself to making ill children's lives a little better.

"If you look at kids who are afflicted with disease and you think about the quality of life they have, any little bit you can do to make it better is worth it," she said.

Hilton serves as chairperson of a St. Jude Children's Research Hospital annual fund raiser called Wheels for Life. Last year, Hilton and 20 children raised \$1,084, doubling their efforts of \$500 from the year before.

Hilton also takes part in the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis and the Think First Program, where she lectures high school students in driver education classes on head and spinal cord injury prevention.



LEADERS IN THE COMMUNITY: Taking part in the County Commission's Medals of Merit proceedings are Cynthia Jones, James DiBernardo, Eduardo Berrones, Shirley Sandberg, Jill

Klaskin-Press, Eli Tourgeman, Nelson Bellido, Jean Rouseau, Mary Ingram, Leroy Ivory Jones, Kenneth Rodman, Russell Wheatley, Donald Slesnick II and Kateri Hilton.

Medals were given for achievement, civic service, education, heroism, leadership, people with disabilities and volunteerism.

"Children are the future and we have to do whatever we can do to make them as strong as possible," she said.

Here are the other winners:

■ **Achievement:** Eduardo Berrones, 35, is the first Mexican-American elected to the Homestead City Council. He came to the United States at the age of 3, the youngest of 12 kids in a family of migrant farm workers.

After graduating from South Dade High in 1979, he became the first in his family to go to college. He has a bachelor's degree from St. Leo College in

Tampa in Computer Information Systems.

When he returned home, Berrones worked to break the migrants' poverty cycle by stressing education and civic responsibility to his community.

"I love helping people, and I stress education because it is important, it was the way for me to get ahead," said Berrones, who is now executive director for Le Jardin Community Center, which caters to 500 children from low-income families.

He is seeking to develop the city's first Hispanic Advisory

Board to give business leaders and Hispanic residents a way to participate in government.

■ **Education:** Russell W. Wheatley, former associate superintendent in the Bureau of Special Programs for Miami-Dade County Public Schools, focuses on giving students a second chance.

The Kendall resident has set up more than 40 different programs in 82 schools for at-risk kids.

■ **Leadership:** Labor and employment lawyer Donald D. Slesnick, 54, of Coral Gables, helped South Dade recover after Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Slesnick was co-chairman of Team Miami-Homestead Air Reserve Base, which worked to

keep the base active, and co-chairman of a "We will Rebuild" subcommittee.

■ **Civic service:** Miami-Dade Police Lt. James DiBernardo, who is based at the Doral station, works with 15 other Miami-Dade police officers to educate students about the dangers of alcohol consumption and driving while under the influence.

■ **Heroism:** Kenneth Rodman of Opa-locka who helped detain a man who ran a woman and her mother off State Road 836 into a sign post in May 1997.

■ **Volunteerism:** Leroy I. Jones, 35, of North Dade who founded Neighbors and Neighbors Association, which helps mom-and-pop stores survive in black neighborhoods.