

Area execs earn recognition

Chagrin Falls, Euclid, Richmond Heights CEOs among finalist for Ernst & Young's Northeast Ohio Entrepreneur of the Year

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This year's crop of finalists for an Ernst & Young honor is a mixed bag of for-profit and nonprofit leaders.

What they all share is a commitment to Northeast Ohio, whether that means job creation and business innovation or the less quantifiable idea of a sense of community.

When David Simpson, immediate past CEO of Hospice of the Western Reserve, heard he was among the finalists for Entrepreneur of the Year, he thought there'd been an error.

"When I first heard that nomination occurred, I thought somebody made a mistake. I really hadn't thought about what we do as so entrepreneurial," Simpson said.

However, the organization does have a number of entrepreneurial efforts under way. For example, its Hospice Institute was among the first entities to become accredited as a fellowship provider for physicians seeking to become certified specialists in palliative and end-of-life care.

Simpson and 24 others will be recognized as finalists at tonight's Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year event at Playhouse Square in Cleveland. The finalists were selected from more than 100 nominations.

There will be similar

events held in 26 regions throughout the country. Those who win the regional competitions will advance to the National Awards Gala on Nov. 12 in Palm Springs, Calif. Seven to nine finalists from Northeast Ohio are expected to be invited to the national gala. That event will be hosted by Jay Leno.

Since its inception as a primarily Lake County service, Hospice of the Western Reserve has grown to serve six counties, with offices in each county, as well as one inpatient facility, employing a total of 850 paid employees and 1,200 volunteers. Despite that growth, Simpson said a large part of his job has been education, not only about the role of hospice care but also about the importance of creating plans for end-of-life care.

Another organization making a significant impact on the community is Mar-Bal Inc., which recently invested some \$750,000 to establish a new product line at its Munn Road facility. That meant hiring about 10 new employees to create Thermital appliance knobs that don't transfer heat.

President Scott Balogh and Vice President Steven Balogh, who are joint finalists for the Ernst & Young award, said investing in Northeast Ohio makes sense for a lot of reasons. The area, known to some as the Poly-

Belt, features a skilled labor base, an "outstanding" supply base that includes the world leaders in hydraulics and a good customer base in terms of the companies that Mar-Bal supplies.

"We feel fortunate that we have those types of resources here and we're able to tap into that, and I think it's really the advantage of the state more than any other," Scott Balogh said.

The brothers are involved in a number of plastics industry organizations and nonprofit organizations as a way to encourage community development.

They also work to be proactive with regard to industry regulation at the state and federal level, hoping the regulatory environment will become friendlier to manufacturers.

Jeffrey Friedman, CEO of Richmond Heights-based Associated Estates Realty Corp., still isn't sure who nominated him for the honor. However, he's pleased with a chance to walk away from tonight's event with an opportunity as Entrepreneur of the Year.

"It's a really terrific thing that Ernst & Young does because it garners a lot of attention to the region, business and people that are so involved in driving good things, good results and attention to the community," Friedman



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Scott and Steven Balogh of Chagrin Falls-based Mar-Bal Inc. are among the area executives that are finalists for Ernst & Young's Northeast Ohio Entrepreneur of the Year award.

said.

Friedman deemed 2010 as a "transformational year" for Associated Estates, which owns 52 properties in eight states. The company ended the year with the top shareholder return of publicly traded apartment property owners for the one-, three-, and five-year periods, Friedman said.

The company also saw more 21- to 34-year-olds — typically the segment most apt to rent — looking for and moving into apartments. That undoubtedly drove business for the company in what was a trying year for firms in other industries.

"The demand is significant and that's helped the apartment business throughout the country," Friedman said.

Despite the success and the appreciation for being recognized by Ernst & Young, Friedman wishes

the award wasn't so singular.

"When I think of an entrepreneur, it sounds so individual to me," he said. "There are 400 or so people who work hard every day to make our business a success.

"I was excited (to learn about being named a finalist), but couldn't help but think how much a part of my success has been from all the people at Associated."

What will Friedman say to Jay Leno, should he be one of those to advance to Palm Springs?

"There's a lot of sporting clichés I could think about," he said, "but we're focused on our business today.

"With regard to the Ernst & Young competition, we're focused on Thursday night. In terms of what happens after that, we'll deal with that (when it happens)."