

THE UNION

May 8, 2015

By Ivan Natividad

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A woman of worth: Local doctor honored as

As a young girl growing up in Nevada City, Sarah Woerner knew she wanted to spend her life helping people.

Now a veteran family physician of more than 35 years, Woerner, 64, has done just that.

On Thursday afternoon, she was honored by California First District Assemblyman Brian Dahle as the district's Woman of the Year.

"I think it's great to give awards to (doctors) who are taking care of people," Woerner said. "But I also think the families deserve awards. I wish there were ceremonies that honor all the families that sacrifice so many things for their kids. They really deserve the award more than I do."

Dahle, who represents California's Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Plumas, Sierra, Siskiyou, Shasta, Butte and Placer counties, said Woerner was honored not just because of her hard work and service to her patients and the local community, but also because of her humility and humanity.

"Seeing how many families step up to take care of kids when bad things happen, and what families go through for their kids is sometimes too heart-wrenching. It keeps you humble." Sarah Woerner

"I represent 25,000 square miles and almost a half million people, and she's the one I chose for this award," said Dahle. "No matter the patient's ability to be able to compensate her back ... and her heart for helping people, makes us proud to be able to show her off ... She's the type of person that's not looking for the accolades, and she just continues doing what she does."

The Woman of the Year ceremony was first held in 1987 to help commemorate Women's History Month. The event has become an annual Capitol tradition to salute women who have done outstanding community service. Honorees are presented with a framed certificate from the State Assembly recognizing their outstanding contributions during a ceremony in the Assembly chambers.

This year's ceremony was held at the state capitol on March 9, but Woerner was out of the country and could not attend.

"I tried to divert them to give it to somebody who would be in town," she said. "Because there are many deserving women who could have gotten it."

So Dahle held a special reception at Western Sierra Medical Center in Grass Valley Thursday to commemorate Woerner's accomplishments and service as a doctor in the very clinic she works.

"We're so proud of all the work that she does," Western Sierra Chief Executive Officer Scott McFarland said. "The reason she's getting this award is because she's so incredible, both here and internationally. She travels around and volunteers her service and if you had to pick somebody, she would be the perfect choice for this award."

A Nevada County native, Woerner graduated from Nevada Union High School and credits her science teachers with sparking her interest in medicine.

After graduating from UC Davis Medical School in 1976, Woerner worked in Winnipeg, Canada receiving pediatric training.

She was offered a job at the University of Manitoba, but after meeting her future husband at a wine tasting class, things changed.

"It was a big coincidence," Woerner said. "He was starting the Nevada City Winery with someone I grew up with. So I ended up moving back here because my husband asked me to marry him and move back to my hometown."

The move worked for Woerner, who couldn't wait to give back to the community where she grew up. She started her own private practice, then joined a group practice before serving in pediatric care with Western Sierra Medical Center.

"My parents had no money, I was the first one to go to college in my family," said Woerner. "I went to college and medical school on scholarships and working. So I feel like I owe the community and everybody to come back and help here because the community really supported me when I was growing up here. It gave me a firm foundation."

WSMC Chief Medical Officer Glenn Thiel said that after working with Western Sierra Medical Center for more than 15 years, Woerner continues to impress her colleagues with her work ethic and dedication.

"You have somebody that's such a model for health care, it kind of makes us all feel a little short. It's something to shoot for," Thiel said. "We're always striving to be as thorough, active and complete as Sarah."

At least once a year, Woerner also travels to medically impoverished countries like Nicaragua and Uganda, to provide services to local clinics.

"I feel like taking care of people is not limited to your geographical area," said Woerner. "And I think I have skills that can help in other places so I try to use those skills where there's a need."

But also working as a doctor locally for so many years has its perks, Woerner says, her favorite being the lifelong connections she makes with the families she serves.

“I have a couple families where their grandparents were my patients, and to me that’s really rewarding,” Woerner said. “Seeing how many families step up to take care of kids when bad things happen, and what families go through for their kids is sometimes too heart-wrenching. It keeps you humble.”

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