

WESTY AWARDS

Uniting Communities on the Western Front

By Paulette Safdieh

In a move to unite the West Side, Dee Rieber, president of the 75th Street Block Association, and Melissa Elstein of the West 80s Neighborhood Association brought together community activists from 34th Street through 116th Street to share advice and solve community issues. The effort behind their joint neighborhood coalition earned Rieber and Elstein special recognition from the West Side community.

The duo dedicate their time as volunteers committed to beautification initiatives like planting trees, preserving the neighborhood's historic brownstones, fighting graffiti proliferation and solving traffic issues.

"It's exciting, because it's not about my work but the work of hundreds of people who have helped this block association," said Rieber, who took on the role of president in 2007. "To me, this award is about recognizing everyone in the field."

Elstein, both flattered and humbled, agreed.

"We both work really hard and are very committed, but we didn't do this by ourselves," said Elstein. "We want people to understand that it's an association."

Rieber, 52, and Elstein, 45, teamed up



PHOTOS BY ANDREW SCHWARTZ

Dee Rieber and Melissa Elstein, who have united West Side block associations from Harlem to Midtown, are the first recipients of Neighborhood Association WESTYs.

last spring after realizing that West Side communities shared similar concerns. With the help of the West 55th Street Block Association's Carl Bevelhimer and Rieber's husband, Dan, the idea took off.

"People think issues are unique to the Upper West Side, but a lot of issues are

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common across the entire West Side," said Elstein. "We want to support each other's work and help one another."

The two have identified many of the community organizations from Midtown to Harlem and are bringing them together for a symposium this spring. They hope to shed light on major community concerns through classes and panels for about 100 expected participants.

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New York City," said Rieber. "What happens to one happens to all."

A longtime West Sider, Elstein studied political science at Barnard College before attending law school at New York University. She got her first taste of community service working as a lawyer in the NYPD's civil enforcement unit in Manhattan after graduation.

"I was drawn to it because of the way you can improve the city," said Elstein, who worked to eliminate prostitution, gambling and drug dealing. "It just kind of made sense."

While on sabbatical three years later, Elstein discovered a passion for yoga. She enrolled in training courses and now runs her own yoga business, in addition to teach-

ing Tai Chi, stress reduction and ballet.

"I work really hard," said Elstein of juggling her yoga business with her community activism. "But who doesn't work hard in New York City?"

She got involved in community work in 2007, working with the West End Preservation Society to save neighborhood brownstones at risk for demolition. She soon recognized a need for a neighborhood association.

"I was in the neighborhood for a long time and I wanted to contribute more," said Elstein. "We felt like mom-and-pop businesses were closing and big chains were moving in. There was a lot of move-

**Neighborhood
Association Award
Melissa Elstein & Dee Rieber**

ment and change, and that's when I started to get involved."

Elstein works actively with the 20th Precinct and Community Board 7 as well as other community organizations like the Central Park Conservancy, Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Citizens Committee for NYC.

Like Elstein, Rieber balances a full-time job with her community work. She runs a real estate agency on the Upper West Side and in Harlem, and views her volunteer work as an extension of her career.

Rieber, who was inspired by her parents (both community activists), said her childhood differed greatly from New York City life. Rieber grew up with eight siblings on a 10-acre Midwestern farm, without running water and electricity.

The family bunked together in a log cabin built by her father on the property.

"When I was 13, I had an epiphany that I wanted to move to New York," said Rieber. "I saw a brochure from New York City and was mesmerized."

Rieber attended New York University for educational theater before acting in soap operas and singing. She went on to teach communication art for 10 years before giving birth to her daughter, Katy, 16 years ago. As a stay-at-home mom, Rieber ran a sewing company before getting her real estate license, which she still uses today.

Since 2007, Rieber has built up the West 75th Street Block Association from 30 people to 150, with a total of 600 people on the email list.

"This was a conscious decision," she said. "I told myself that if I was going to do it, I was doing it right."

Mel Wymore, outgoing chairperson of Community Board 7, agrees the award is well deserved.

"New York City remains vibrant and strong in part because of its local organizations," said Wymore. "Dee and Melissa have not only woven their own blocks together, they have connected block associations throughout Manhattan's Upper West Side. That's a wonderful contribution!"