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Vida en el Valle

Chamber honors business leaders Awards given at Aug. 16 luncheon

By Gabriel Alexander / Independent Staff Writer

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Rodney McKinney would keep working in Mac's Tires even if he won the lottery.

"This shop is my home. I've been here all my life. I've changed residences, but the shop has always been here," McKinney said, the third McKinney to own the shop on Clovis Avenue.

"Even if I was to win a \$20 million lottery, I wouldn't close this down. It's a family heirloom."

McKinney's loyalty to his family's business may be one reason he received the Small Business of the Year Award from the Clovis Chamber of Commerce. Every year the chamber selects a Clovis business for the honor, as well as a Business Woman of the Year and an Einar Cook Leadership Award recipient. Einar Cook was the largest Clovis employer in the 1940s and an active member of the community.

The chamber honored this year's winners at an Aug. 16 luncheon at the Clovis Veterans Memorial Building. Ken Fransen, a Clovis attorney, won the Einar Cook Leadership Award, and Carolyn Kovalski, senior vice president of campus operations at Heald College, won Business Woman of the Year.

"It definitely swells me with pride," McKinney said about the honor. "Usually something like this comes around when someone's getting ready to retire, so it felt good."

The 42-year-old's first job was at the shop sweeping the floors and taking out the trash.

McKinney's grandfather, Mac McKinney, opened the store in 1950 and his father purchased the business in 1991. Rodney McKinney took over in 1996 and now oversees 11 employees and is the president of the California Dealer Council for Tire Professionals.

He calls his customers "friends" and provides health-care benefits to his employees -- something that's rare in his industry, McKinney said.

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"One of the secrets of Rodney's success is knowing the value of customer service and taking good care of his employees by providing full health-care benefits," said Fran Blackney, communications director for the chamber.

Carolyn Kovalski, of Heald College, won Business Woman of the Year even though the institution is in Fresno and Kovalski is a Fresno resident. The college, which grants associate degrees, serves students from Clovis and is a member of the Clovis Chamber of Commerce.

Kovalski also owns Facelogic, a spa on Herndon and Willow avenues in Clovis.

Since Kovalski joined the Fresno Heald College eight years ago, the school has doubled in enrollment and now serves about 1,800 students.

"She has helped Heald College become one of the premier colleges in the area," Blackney said.

Kovalski's first job was sacking groceries at a military base store. Her father was in the Air Force and encouraged her to get a college degree even though he never went to college himself.

"There was a big class distinction whether your father had a degree or not," Kovalski said about growing up on military bases. "The ones with the degrees were always the boss and got the promotions."

Kovalski graduated with a master's in business administration from the University of Redlands.

Ken Fransen, of Bolen, Fransen & Russell LLP, won the Einar Cook Leadership Award for his multiple contributions to the community. He was a founding board member of the Fresno County chapter of Habitat for Humanity, which builds homes for lower-income families. As a former president and current member of the Clovis Rotary Club, he was influential in the construction and opening of the first Clovis Boys and Girls Club.

"Besides running a successful law office, Ken's leadership abilities are apparent in the philanthropic work he's done in the Valley," Blackney said.

A giving heart is the key to a successful career, Fransen said.

"There's no question the key to success is a sincere desire to help other people," he said. "Without that you're just going through the motions and success will be difficult to come by. With a sincere, deep desire to help people everything else follows."

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When rock meets righteousness, somebody ought to be watching.

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