

A SENSE OF JOY

by Monica Koch

What makes an Athena Award Recipient?

Every woman's story is different, but they all have a few things in common:

excellence in business or profession, assistance of other women, and community involvement. The 2007 Fox Cities Honoree attributes her recognition to one thing: faith.



Chris Hanson, president of Hanson Benefits, Inc. is 2007's Athena Award Recipient. With a background in medical billing and claims, she's been a licensed insurance broker for fifteen years. Four-and-a-half years ago, she decided to strike out on her own. Well, she didn't decide so much as she was compelled. "I was called out of corporate life," she says. "The Lord called me to be obedient. It was a big step, but I think when you really know that you're walking the way He wants you to, pieces fall into place. I've been very blessed since."

Hanson, a devout Christian, started Hanson Benefits, Inc. "on a shoestring" with just her car and a cell phone in 2003. The business has since grown by leaps and bounds, enabling Hanson to hire full- and part-time employees and move into an office in Kimberly. "That calling out of corporate life to start a business isn't what I anticipated, but I wouldn't go backwards for anything," she says.

Now Hanson Benefits, Inc. is a successful small independent benefits broker who's mission "...is to help you fully understand your employee benefits, enabling you to make cost-effective and efficient decisions for yourself and your employees. Insurance is the vehicle by which our faith is lived." Hanson's specialty is small businesses. Her average client has less than ten employees.

For Chris Hanson, work, faith, family, and community service all go hand in hand. When her mother passed away a few years ago, Hanson says,

"I felt as though she passed her faith on to me in just wanting to live an honorable life." Two years prior, one of Hanson's best friends, Vicki Smith, succumbed to cancer. "I sat at her funeral and rededicated my life to the Lord. Vicki had such a strong faith—I prayed I would pick that baton up and carry on."

These life-changing experiences led to Hanson's dedication to community service. "Community service is a culmination of giving back what I believe the Lord has given to me," she says. "It's a sense of joy to give back to the community." When Hanson's mother passed away, she became involved with the Alzheimer's Association. When her friend passed away, she collaborated with Smith's husband's company, Valley Label, and sponsored a team for the American Cancer Society Sole Burner. Hanson also supports WEMI Christian Radio, Best Friends of Neenah-Menasha, National Day of Prayer Committee, Acts 1:8 Ministry, Life! Promotions, Mother & Unborn Baby Care, Community Benefit Tree, CAP Services, and the Will Krause Fundraiser. "What I can't do physically with time I'm able to do with contributions," Hanson adds.

In addition, Hanson has been an ambassador for the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce since 1988 and is involved with the annual membership drive, Project Thank You, and the golf committee.

When asked what her hobbies are, she immediately replies, "Those are my hobbies. The women who work for me are my family and my clients are my children. Sometimes I'll care more about my clients and the problems that they're having than they do." Despite her hard work at her business and throughout the community, she

does, however, find time to work out with her husband. The Hansons can occasionally be seen out and about on their tandem bike in nice weather. But free time seems almost foreign to Hanson, who cheerfully pours much of her energy into helping others through her chosen profession and her involvement with community organizations.

The motto Hanson chose for her business, "Compassionately serving you...passionate about what we do." carries over into all aspects of her life. Her service and dedication to her clients and community don't make it difficult to see why Chris Hanson was named the recipient of the 2007 Athena Award.

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Advice to other women who might like to start a business:

"Part of my success would be determination and perseverance. I didn't focus on 'What if I didn't succeed?' My goal was to press forward. I'm passionate about what I do, and I have a lot of knowledge about it. I used to visit little tiny agencies outside our area and pick their brains, trying to get an understanding of how they ran their business. Pay attention to everything that you're doing, because it will all be important later—even if you don't think so now." — Chris Hanson

The Best Advice you've received:

"It was nothing he said to me—it was my father's example of his work ethic. That's part of why I do what I do and why I work at the pace that I do. My father was born in Germany and was in the German Army in WWII. He met Mom as a POW in England. They went to Canada, where he learned a new language and culture. Then they moved to the U.S. and he started his own business. There's a high degree of motivation in my heritage." — Chris Hanson

New Years Resolution

Hanson's mother owned a one-year Bible, which she read every year for ten years running, only stopping when her Alzheimer's disease affected her ability to read. Chris inherited her mother's Bible, and tried several times to finish it but wasn't able to until 2007. For 2008, she says, "My continued goal will be to read it again and learn more. I'm also going to encourage and challenge my small group Bible study to pick up any one-year Bible—or I will provide them with one—and to begin 2008 by reading daily and sharing every week as part of our study."

The Athena Award

The Athena tradition was introduced in 1982 by the Lansing, MI, Chamber of Commerce to recognize outstanding business women in the community. The annual award has since grown to include more than 500 communities across the world and is now administered by Chicago-based ATHENA International.

Nominees are evaluated using the following criteria:

- Demonstrates excellence, creativity, and initiative in their business or profession;
- Generously assists women in attaining their fullest potential;
- Devotes time and energy to the community in a meaningful way.

Women and men who meet the criteria are referred to as Athena Award "recipients" or "honorees" rather than "winners". The award isn't intended to be a contest between competing nominees, but rather a recognition of excellence.

Previous Fox Cities Athena Award Recipients

Susan Knaack	Mary Anne Drewek	Elinor Smith
Vivian Huth	Mary Hosmer	Debra Michiels
Ruth Ann Heeter	Bonnie DeBaal	Anne Paulus
Katherine Westover	Kate Dugan	Karla Blair
Elizabeth Hoover	Linda Kennedy	Sharon Hulce
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