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GAZETTE**Stavros commends advocates' work****BY KATHLEEN MELLE STAFF WRITER**[EMAIL THIS WRITER](#)[MORE STORIES BY THIS WRITER](#)**[Originally published on: Friday, December 17, 2004]****NORTHAMPTON - The Stavros Center for Independent Living has honored three local advocates who work for the rights of people with disabilities.**

Oryx Cohen and Will Hall, co-founders of the Northampton-based Freedom Center, and Michael Nagy, chairman of the city's Committee on Disabilities, received the annual Ted Martineau Awards at a ceremony in October at Chateau Provost in Chicopee.

Martineau, a quadriplegic who worked tirelessly to make the community more accessible to those with disabilities, was president for 20 years of the Stavros board of directors. He died in 1997.

The recipients were chosen from among 35 to 40 nominations that were submitted by people living in Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden counties who receive services from Stavros.

Stavros Center for Independent Living, a member agency of the United Way of Franklin County, was founded 30 years ago as part of the effort to get people out of institutional settings and empowered to live freely in the community.

Cohen and Hall

Janet Shaw, director of independent living services at Stavros, said through their work at the Freedom Center, Cohen and Hall have effectively initiated a model of independent living for people diagnosed with mental illness that offers an alternative to the standard medical model of treatment. "That is very unusual," Shaw said.

Freedom Center, founded by the two men in 2001, is the only Pioneer Valley group run by and for people labeled with severe mental illnesses, according to the group's Web site.

Hall, who said he was once diagnosed with schizophrenia, but who has been medication-free for many years, said the award was an important milestone for the Freedom Center, because "it publicly honors the work we do."

"It was personally meaningful to be recognized ... to feel we're an honored part of the larger disability rights community," Hall said. He added, "Oryx and I couldn't do this without the organizers and activists of Freedom Center. They make it happen."

Hall said members of the Freedom Center have been working closely with Stavros through a federal grant administered by Safe Passage of Northampton, which allows them to do training with organizations, including ServiceNet, city



RYAN HERMENS
Michael Nagy, chairman Northampton's Committ Disabilities, was honore helping to ensure acces people with disabilities .

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police and local hospitals, about abuse and violence against people with disabilities.

Cohen said, in the past, he too was diagnosed as mentally ill but has been successful in recovering without the use of medications that doctors once prescribed.

"Our main focus is to legitimize alternatives," Cohen said. "The more we can spread the word about that - that alternatives do work and people can and do recover - that's where we're going."

Freedom Center sponsors free weekly yoga classes in downtown Northampton and a variety of programs throughout Hampshire County.

Nagy

Shaw, of the Stavros Center, said the other award recipient, Michael Nagy, "has made tremendous strides" ensuring accessibility to people with disabilities. "He's tenacious. He's out there all the time," Shaw said.

Like the other honorees, Nagy said he couldn't accomplish what he does without the dedication of others with whom he works.

"It's always nice to be recognized, but I see myself more as an orchestra conductor," Nagy said. "I, personally, have not accomplished all these things."

Nagy said his committee will continue to look into ways to make the city ever more accessible, including the development of more "curb cuts" which allow wheelchair users, like Nagy, to move freely on city sidewalks.

"I've learned that people with different kinds of disabilities have different kinds of needs," said Nagy, who said the results of the committee's efforts also benefit people who are not disabled, as in the case of the curb cuts, which are appreciated by people pushing baby strollers and using hand trucks as well.

Other programs spearheaded by Nagy's committee include the installation of "audible crosswalks" at the corner of Main and Pleasant streets and revising an accessibility guide to Northampton, which is available at no charge at the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce and the Council on Aging office.

In addition, the committee offers matching grants of up to \$1,000 to businesses and nonprofit organizations to make their properties more accessible to the disabled.

Paul Winske Award

Also at the luncheon, several businesses and institutions received the Paul Winske Award for accessibility, including the A2Z Science and Learning Center on King Street, the old Elks lodge on Center Street and St. Mary's Church on Elm Street. Holy Smokes Barbecue and Whole Hog House in West Hatfield was also honored.

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