

Janel Skelley: Diversity of views, voices Athena mission

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The Athena Awards Program of Greater Pittsburgh is marking its 27th year, and it has come a long way since [George H.W. Bush](#) was in the White House and shoulder pads were in every woman's wardrobe.

Initially an annual luncheon to draw attention to women's leadership, Athena-Pittsburgh has grown into a nine-month program of outreach and activities. While we look forward to our Oct. 2 gathering at the Westin Convention Center Hotel, it will cap nearly a year of work to identify and elevate women — especially young and emerging leaders — who demonstrate excellence in their profession, contribute to their community and help other women to succeed through mentorship.

This effort touches on several goals of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. The Conference envisions a Pittsburgh region that provides sustainable prosperity for everyone who lives here. A key component of that vision is having a diversity of viewpoints and voices at decision-making levels — including the viewpoints and voices of women.

That will be essential if the region is to continue to thrive and fill the workforce gap that is upon us. Younger workers and emerging leaders emphasize the value of living and working in places that reflect the rich multiplicity of America. Our region needs to do a better job on this front, and Athena-Pittsburgh is part of that effort.

Barbara McNees, the first female president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, helped to establish the Athena-Pittsburgh program as a stand-alone event in the 1990s. In 2011, she led the expansion of the program with the Athena Young Professional Award, which recognizes women age 35 or younger who are role models to other women and girls. I have been honored, since McNees' 2013 retirement, to help lead a program that brings nearly 900 people together annually to recognize the women helping to develop the leaders of tomorrow.

This year, a combined 60 women were nominated for the traditional Athena award and the young professional award. That impressive group was — with difficulty — whittled down to eight inspiring finalists who excel in finance, law, nonprofit administration and health care research and advocacy.



JOE WOJCIK

Allegheny Conference on Community Development
CFO Janel Skelley.

Recognition by the Athena program has helped women in all stages of their careers to extend their impact professionally and philanthropically. As Jen Cairns, the first Athena Young Professional Award recipient, puts it: “The Athena distinction has given me a louder voice and expanded my reach. It’s connected me to policy and decision makers, with whom I can advocate for our region, and for the causes that are near and dear to my heart.”

The program also supports burgeoning female leaders through the Barbara McNees Spirit of Athena Scholarship. It has paid tuition for two emerging leaders to attend the Carnegie Mellon Leadership and Negotiation Academy for Women, a nationally recognized executive leadership program.

A new element of the program this year is the Athena Day of Service. Sponsored by Citizens Bank and coordinated with the local United Way Women’s Leadership Council’s Day of Action, we hope that the Sept. 27 event will bring Athena nominees and friends from across the years together for a day of service assisting female military veterans, among others.

I encourage you to learn about the Pittsburgh region’s current and future leaders at Athena-Pittsburgh.com. And please join us on Oct 2 to celebrate these extraordinary women.