

Westbankers' library district effort nets statewide honor

By Ed Allen
Editor

Longtime Westbank Community Library supporters Jann Brown and Will Richardson were recently presented with the Texas Library Association Outstanding Service to Libraries award for their work on the creation of the first ever library district in the state.

After years of searching for ways to better fund the Westbank Community Library, Brown and Richardson led a campaign in the last session of the Texas Legislature to pass legislation allowing local residents to vote to approve the creation of public library districts. Such legislation exists in nearly half of all states. The effort required hundreds of hours of planning, meetings with legislators and testimony before legislative committees. Their efforts paid off when the 75th Legislature gave its final approval to the public library district bill, SB 1674 by Senator Gonzalo Barrientos of Austin.

In a January of 1998 referendum, Westbank voters overwhelmingly approved the taxing district, which enables levying a one-half cent sales tax to fund the library.

The contributions of Brown and Richardson also helped establish a new source of funding for other small community and rural public libraries in Texas. Since passage of that bill, four communities have approved the creation of library districts: Westbank, Salado, Wells Branch and Benbrook.

Brown, former co-owner of the *Westlake Picayune* with her ex-husband, George Phoenix, said the news of winning the award came as a "total surprise" since Westbank Community Library Director Beth Fox kept the whole application process secret.

"She had called my husband (Dick Brown) to ask me for a resume, and I asked him 'What do you want with it. You're not going to try to get me a job, are you?'" Brown recalled.

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According to Brown, the honor is significant due to the fact that she and Richardson were considered for the award along with some of the most outstanding librarians throughout the state.

Brown credited her part in the process of getting the law in place to the help of her husband, an attorney well known lobbyist. "I just walked around the Capitol a lot. He knew what to do. It couldn't have happened without him," she noted.

Richardson, a past president of the Westbank Community Library, thanked numerous individuals in accepting award including Jann Brown for "haunting the halls through the whole legislative session day and night" under the expert guidance of her her husband, the entire community that solidly supported the effort and especially Fox.

"It's been her vision and her (Fox's) leadership over the past 10 years that's gotten us to where we are today - a small but state-of-the-art library that's about to expand to better serve our area," he said, adding that indeed the library has come a long way since starting out with only two rooms over bank.

Fox said she is very pleased that Brown and Richardson received the recognition they so richly deserve.

"It would be a great accomplishment if just our library benefitted from their work, but libraries all over Texas will benefit for years to come," said Fox, who began looking for a way to fund the library with tax dollars a couple of years ago.

"I asked for a meeting with the Texas Library Association to determine how we could get a definitive ruling on whether or not library districts were constitutional," she



Will Richardson and Jann Brown picked up the prestigious Texas Library Association Outstanding Service to Libraries award at the TLA's annual conference in Dallas on April 21.

recalled. "We were going to talk to the Texas Attorney General's office about what would be involved, and at some point the director of the Texas Library Association said, 'I think you guys should just try to pass some legislation and bypass the whole attorney general ruling.'"

Then, with the next Legislative Session only months away, Fox recruited Brown who got her husband involved. And an effort was launched that wasn't given much chance of success.

"We started down a path where we were babes in the woods," she said. "We really didn't envision it passing that Legislative Session, but we were able to line up some bipartisan support in Keel and Barrientos.

The rest is history. Brown and Richardson received their awards at the Texas Library Association 1999 Annual conference in Dallas April 21.

The Texas Library Association Outstanding Service to Libraries Award is presented annually to individuals who are notable lay advocates of libraries.