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Leaders honored for promoting diversity

By **TREVOR ANDERSON, Staff Writer**

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Area leaders in promoting diversity were honored at the third annual Upstate Diversity Leadership Awards Dinner presented by Furman University's Riley Institute Tuesday at the Marriott at Renaissance Park.

The event, attended by a crowd of about 500, recognized award recipients in six categories: individual, business, international, nonprofit organization, college student and high school student.

Leon Wiles, vice chancellor of USC Upstate, received top honors with the Calder D. Ehrmann Award, which recognizes individual achievement in fostering diversity and change.

"This is a huge honor and I'm absolutely thrilled to receive recognition from my colleagues especially for something I have a passion for," Wiles said.

Wiles, who has made a commitment to cultural and ethnic diversity in higher education, took the lead in increasing minority enrollment at USC Upstate by 30 percent, increasing minority faculty and staff, completing the university's diversity action plan, establishing a multicultural affairs office and revitalizing the international studies center along with many other initiatives.

"You run into resistance to change sometimes," Wiles said. "This award is validation that working to promote diversity is important."

Dorman High School graduate and Clemson University graduate student, Darris Means, of Spartanburg, was honored as an Outstanding College Student for promoting diversity.

Means, 24, who is especially interested in empowering young people from economically challenging socioeconomic backgrounds, has served as an advisor to the Children's Miracle Network in benefits for Greenville's Children's Hospital.

He has also done extensive research on racial and social segregation and helped develop strategies to

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enhance positive climates on college campuses.

"The biggest honor should be for my professors that encouraged me to reach out to the community," Means said. "Sometimes I think our generation loses sight of the sacrifices made from those that have come before us."

Cristina Schleifer, a Cuban immigrant who entered the U.S. as a young girl unable to speak English, was honored with the award for Outstanding Contribution to International Diversity.

Schleifer, a leader and advocate for Greenville's Hispanic community, is an educator on diversity issues and actively recruits Hispanic citizens to participate in community initiatives. She also brought the festival "Ritmo Tropical," or "Rhythm of the Tropics," to Greenville in 2005.

"Upstate Diversity has experienced so much and I'm glad that we've come such a long way," Schleifer said. "But there is so much left to be done. We would love to see more participation from all of the community's different ethnic groups because diversity means more than just two cultures coming together."

Richard Berman, 17, a senior at Greenville High School, was recognized as the Outstanding High School Student for his work with the Outward Bound Unity Diversity Program, which is designed to help students initiate compassionate social change. The first-generation American, whose parents emigrated from South Africa, also pioneered a project called "Books for Africa" in which he collected over 1,000 books for an underserved school in his parents' home country.

Bon Secours St. Francis Health System was recognized as the Outstanding Business for providing \$54 million in free medical care to underserved residents of the Upstate.

YWCA of Greenville was honored as the Outstanding Non-Profit Organization for its work with the Greenville community to improve the lives of young women and their families.

The 2007 Upstate Diversity Leadership Awards Dinner was hosted by the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with the Greater Greenville and Anderson Area Chambers.

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