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Merl Code honored for promoting diversity, opening hearts

By E. Richard Walton
Staff writer

It was hard to say whether Greenville's business, political and education heavyweights dropped in for the Beyond Differences banquet at the Hilton hotel on Thursday to honor Merl Code for what he's done for diversity or for how he has improved Upstate lives.

Paul Guy, executive director of Beyond Differences, said Code was quietly working on race relations since the 1980s, before it became politically hip.

"Merl is one of the pioneers of diversity," he said. "When you see Merl, you don't see color."

A diverse group of more than 250 spent three hours at the Hilton hotel on Haywood Road to toast and honor Code, an attorney with Ogletree, Deakins Nash, Smoak & Stewart.

"He is one of the most sincere, approachable and genuine persons that I have met," said Mary Hipp.

Code, a part-time judge, is the recipient of the 2009 Bridge of Unity Award, which is given for setting the tone for diversity, Guy said.

Code has also sat on the boards at Furman University, the Urban League of the Upstate and Greenville Hospital System.

Herb Johnson, a spokesman for Michelin North American, a sponsor, said the leadership Code has displayed has affected not just Greenville but all of South Carolina.

Tami McKnew, fellow lawyer, said she couldn't conceive of a way of thanking him.

"There's no way to honor Merl," she said. "It would go on for years."

Code, a former pro football player and former leader for the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, seems to have touched so many, many lives, speakers said.

"All of our lives are enriched because of Merl," McKnew said.

Among those on the 22-person banquet steering committee were Joe Erwin, Hayne Hipp, C. Dan Joyner, Dick Riley, Xanthene Norris, S.T. Peden, Minor Shaw, David Shi, Bill Whitney and David Wilkins.

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