

Among America's finest

DeSoto one of 10 All-America cities; Lancaster receives Spirit Award

By **DAPHNE BROWN**
News Editor

DeSoto has struck gold in its quest to be the best.

The National Civic League named DeSoto among 10 All-America City winners June 11 for capturing the essence of its problems and working together as a community to solve them.

Two other Texas cities, Lancaster and Pharr, also made the finalist cut. Pharr went on to join DeSoto as one of the 10 winners. Lancaster received a Spirit Award for bringing its fifth- and sixth-grade bands to entertain the day before and the day of skit performances.

A group of DeSoto citizens traveled to Anaheim, Calif., to participate in the competition and were among the first to receive the news.

DeSoto Mayor Michael Hurtt said it was wonderful being acknowledged by his peers this week at a regional breakfast for all the hard work it took to make the cut. Plano was the last Texas city to earn the distinction in 1994, while Fort Worth has won it twice.

"This is really special, but this is not an award for city

administration," Hurtt said. "It validates the 55 empowered homeowners associations involved with city hall and the DeSoto Dining and Dialogue, which deals with diversity and reaches one person at a time."

Hurtt said the All-America Cities logo will be utilized on the city's two water towers soon.

"This has never happened south of the Trinity River before," he said. "We're not treated with the same respect, necessarily, when it comes to diversity.

"The fact of the matter is all of the Best Southwest communities are doing similar things like Operation Clean Sweep," he said. "This is validation for all of us because if you were among the top 30 finalists, you are a winner."

Denise Valentine, chair of DeSoto Dining and Dialogue (DDD), said the required skit, which was basically the more than 20-page AAC application come to life, put DeSoto over the top. A committee of city and community volunteers identified the city's work with its homeowners associations, DDD and a Hip Hop Teen

Summit as areas of focus. The skit was called "DeSoto — Changing for Good."

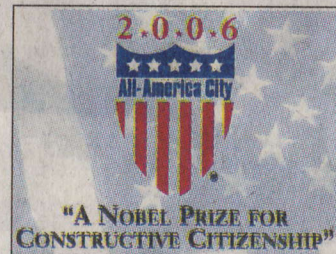
"The skit was very well written," Valentine, who has worked with DDD since January 2004, said. "It gave a clear picture to the judges of what was written in the application.

"A lot of people said that by the end of our skit they were brought to tears," she said. "That took us over the edge."

The skit involved a DDD dining event in which Debby Baugh, wife of city manager Jim Baugh, played host. DeSoto City Council member Thelma and her husband, Jimmy, were guests.

"In the opening scene, Jimmy Clardy is reluctant because he thinks the food won't be good and they are going to want to talk about his innermost feelings," Valentine said. "So, of course, when they get to the host's house, the main dish is tofu surprise and the first question is 'What was your first interaction with racism and how did you feel?'"

Valentine said the skit goes into how DeSoto doubled and tripled in size and people not



liking one another and "white flight."

"We explained that the homeowners associations were used to create neighborhoods,

See **FINEST**, Page 9



Today photo by CHRIS HUDSON

Rolanda Brigham, practices her part in the All-America Cities skit, "DeSoto — Changing for Good," June 8 at Town Center before the California competition.



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Michael Hurtt
Desoto Mayor

in its work plan to develop an implementation plan for pursuing All-America City status and in the 2006 Work Plan, their goal was to be acknowledged by the NCL with the All-America City Award. As a result, City staff and members of our community spent countless hours gathering information, formulating a plan and completing the application for the All-America City Award.

"Completing the application required us to look back at our challenges and accomplishments over the past three years," according to the city's website.

"Once Desoto was chosen as a finalist, work began in earnest to put together a live presentation for the judges in Anaheim, Calif. The cast of Desoto's live presentation countless hours in rehearsal, memorizing lines, building sets and hitting their marks. All their hard work has resulted in Desoto receiving the All-America City Award."

with what the city is doing to engage young people with the Citizens Academy for its youth and the Teen Hip Hop Summit.

Valentine said she can remember telling her husband that she felt DDD was a worthy cause back in 2004 when she was approached to add the organization to her list of charities.

"I knew I would enjoy spending a lot of time getting it off of the ground, but I was so convinced that I let go of my position with two other non-profits to devote more time to DDD," she said. "This work is more about trying to help the city than trying to bring recognition to any one cause."

Now in its 56th year, ACC recognizes superior grassroots community problem-solving and is awarded to communities that identify their challenges and collaboratively work together to achieve results.

For the last few years, the Desoto City Council has included an initiative

watch the other skits prior to Desoto's performance.

"I personally didn't want to shake my own confidence by watching what others were doing," she said, adding that she did watch Lancaster and Phart's performances.

"Even though I felt we were doing well, I had no idea just how well," she said.

The judges relieved Desoto's anxiety and anticipation by announcing Desoto as the first of the 10 finalists during a ceremony on the evening of June 11.

Hurtt said Desoto merely went about its business.

"We do things a little differently, and we didn't come out with horns, bells and whistles," Hurtt said. "We just came out and told our story. We thought we had missed it, but the judges believed and validated what we had to say."

He said the judges were impressed

as well as Desoto Dining and Dialogue and the Hip Hop Teen Summit," she said. "We closed the skit with a Broadway song that talked about how things change. We end with the same people sitting at the dinner table and Jimmy asking, 'You got anymore of that tofu surprise?'"

Valentine said there was a 10-minute question-and-answer session after the skit. The actors fielded four questions: one on how the associations were used to offset the city's climate, three questions on DDD and one on the how the city used hip hop music on its youth despite its negative image.

She said in talking with one of the judges after the competition, Desoto was the only city with a unanimous vote from the 10 judges.

"We just went out there knowing what we did," she said. "We had no idea what other people would do. We had no idea what normal was."

Valentine said she chose not to