



P.O. Box 389
25 Government Drive
Newton, North Carolina 28658-0389
Telephone: 828-465-8200
Fax: 828-465-8392

For Release: March 21, 2017

SYLVIA KIDD RAY NAMED RECIPIENT OF CATAWBA COUNTY SPIRIT AWARD

NEWTON, NC – The Catawba County Board of Commissioners bestowed its highest honor, the Catawba County Spirit Award, on local historian and longtime community advocate Sylvia Kidd Ray. Ray was presented the award during the Commissioners’ March 20 public meeting.

The Catawba County Spirit Award was created by the Board of Commissioners in 1998 to recognize citizens who have displayed “that unique Catawba County Spirit” – as defined in the award by goodness, valor, creativity, benevolence, compassion, patriotism, and a high order of service to Catawba County, North Carolina, and/or the nation.

Ray, a Newton, N.C. native and resident, was honored with the Spirit Award due to her lifelong passion for and commitment to the history of Catawba County. She is best known as a local historian and journalist who has been active for many years in historical preservation projects and as a speaker and author on topics of local history.

“I can’t think of a more deserving individual for the Spirit Award,” said Commissioner Sherry Butler. “Sylvia is a living record of our history, and she’s dedicated her life to ensuring our history is preserved and known. She knows about the buildings and the places, and she also knows the stories of the people who made this county what it is. The value Sylvia brings to our community is phenomenal.”

“Sylvia knows more about our history than probably all of us combined,” added Commissioner and Board Chair Randy Isenhower. “I enjoy hearing her stories about the county, because she shares more than just what happened. She also knows why it was important and what resulted from it. You can tell she has a great love for the people, the history, and the heritage of our county.”

Ray grew up in the offices of the *Observer News Enterprise* (which was owned by her family at the time) and watching proceedings in Newton’s 1924 Courthouse. As Commissioner Butler commented, “I’m certain Sylvia was born with a notepad in her hand and a story to tell.” Ray took up a career in local journalism and eventually retired as editor of the paper, where she continues to serve as a columnist and feature story writer.

After retiring from the paper, Ray began a second career in education and community service. A magna cum laude graduate of Lenoir-Rhyne College with a degree in English, Ray taught classes at Catawba Valley Community College and was an English instructor for both the Catawba County and Newton-Conover school districts. She then spent five years coordinating the State of North Carolina’s Catawba County Community Service work program from offices in the Catawba County Justice Center.

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Ray's lifetime career, however, has been in telling and preserving the history of Catawba County. She served as a trustee of the Catawba County Museum of History, where she played an active role in establishing the museum in the 1924 Courthouse. She was also involved in the creation of the Newton-Conover Civic and Performance Place as an adaptive reuse of the former high school and in the relocation and restoration of the former Newton railroad depot for community use. In 2005, Ray was integrally involved in the City of Newton's sesquicentennial by serving as one of four steering committee members and providing publicity for the year-long celebration.

Ray's civic involvement includes two four-year terms on the North Carolina Executive Mansion Fine Arts Committee. She was honored for her volunteer work in Catawba County by North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt and was named 1995 Catawba County Business Woman of the Year by the local Business and Professional Women organization. A longtime member and former director of the Newton-Conover Rotary Club, Ray was the second person to receive the club's Dr. William T. MacLaughlin Award for humanitarian endeavors and was recently honored with the 2014 Charles R. Corriher Vocational Service Award.

True to her writing roots, Ray has authored magazine articles and several published books including a history of her alma mater, Newton-Conover High School, and a history of the county manager form of government. She served as a consultant to Dr. Gary Freeze of Catawba College on his three-volume history of Catawba County, "The Catawbans," and his history of the City of Newton, "She Is Not Yet Finished." Recently, Ray completed an as-yet-unpublished manuscript on the history of the 25 men who have served as Catawba County Sheriff.

"Sylvia has always been very involved in our community," said Commissioner Barbara Beatty. "She's just a delight, kind and also so professional. She is always willing to help anyone who asks, and she's never met a stranger. She embodies what the Spirit Award is all about."

The award itself is an etched piece of Lucite cut in the shape of Catawba County which contains a metallic nugget to reflect the county's history as one of the largest gold-producing areas in the country. Gold also symbolizes three key attributes associated with the award: Heart of Gold, representing something regarded as having great value or goodness; the Golden Sun, which represents something lustrous, radiant, resplendent, of the greatest value or importance, precious, marked by peace, prosperity and often creativeness; and the Golden Rule, the maxim that one should behave toward others as one would have others behave toward oneself.

The award's seven previous recipients are Ethel Compton Lutz (awarded posthumously in 1998), Ruth M. Mackie (2004), Charles M. Snipes (2008), W. Stine Isenhour (2008), Cass Ballenger (2008), L. David Huffman (2010), and Ned Jarrett (2011).

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Media Contact: Amy McCauley, Communications & Marketing Director, (828) 465-8464,
amccauley@catawbacountync.gov