

Kansans honored at Native Sons, Daughters banquet

By DICK BOYD

The Native Sons and Daughters of Kansas honored country music superstar Martina McBride as "Kansan of the Year" and rural ambassador Marci Penner as "Distinguished Kansan of the Year" at their annual banquet in the Maner Conference Center in Topeka last Friday evening.

A capacity crowd of nearly 800 attended to honor the two native Kansans during one of the main events held to celebrate the state of Kansas on its 145th birthday on January 29.

The purpose of the Native Sons and Daughters organization is to assist in preserving Kansas history, show loyalty to Kansas traditions, join in honoring our pioneer ancestors and have a part in instilling the ideals of patriotism in youth.

This non-partisan organization is for all Kansans. Any native-born Kansan is eligible. Persons who have adopted Kansas as their native state are welcomed as associate members.

Both honorees grew up as farm girls but took different roads to success.

McBride, who was born in Medicine Lodge and grew up on her family's farm outside Sharon, told the crowd that growing up in Kansas "shaped the person who I am today."

McBride has amassed nearly every honor her industry bestows. She recalled as a teenager saying, sarcastically, "Kansas is a good place to be from," with the emphasis on "from".

She told the crowd she dreamed of exotic places. "So, I moved to Hutchinson" after graduating from high school, she said. McBride, who until then performed in her father's country band, sang with a rock group.

"We toured all the glamorous hot spots. We performed in Salina, Hays, Goodland and Norton," she said.

She then moved to Wichita, where she met her future husband, John. After they married, they relocated to Nashville, Tenn., where she could pursue a career as an entertainer and he could achieve his dream of operating his own concert sound company.

Together, they secured for her a recording contract that in the past 15 years has yielded 10 albums selling more than 16 million copies and scoring hit single after hit single.

"Now, we've traveled all over the world and in every state of the union," she told the crowd. "As a 39-year-old with a much deeper and wiser attitude, I say 'Kansas is a great place to be from.'"

"John and I both remember the values, morals, strong work ethic and sense of accountability instilled in us by our parents as we grew up. We are working very hard to raise our three daughters in the same way.

"We may be raising them in Nashville but we're really raising them as Kansas girls.

"I am so humble and honored to accept this award."

Both honorees were introduced by Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius, who presented each with a framed proclamation of their honor along with a gift from the organization.

"In addition to being a musical superstar, Martina is a loving wife, mother and daughter," said Sebelius.

"Her songs bring a message of hope for victims of domestic violence as well as those in other unfortunate situations. She is a great role model for Kansans. She has never forgotten her roots."

Penner is a native of Inman. A graduate of the University of Kansas, where she was a double-sport letter winner, she received her master's degree in counseling and guidance from the University of Wisconsin. She spent five years in the Philadelphia area before returning to the family farm.

Marci and her father, Milferd Penner, co-authored three Kansas guidebooks in the early 1990s and then founded the Kansas Sampler Foundation. The mission of the foundation is to help preserve and sustain rural culture and to support rural communities. Marci is the executive director of the Kansas Sampler Foundation. The Kansas Sampler Festival annually attracts 8,000 to 10,000 people who come to sample the attractions, ethnic food and entertainers of Kansas.

Another brainchild of Marci's is the Kansas Explorers Club which she says was created to inspire, educate and encourage the exploration and appreciation of Kansas and have fun doing it.

"The Explorer" publication sent to members six times a year publicizes special features of Kansas towns and upcoming Explorer "Happenings" in those towns.

During the past two years, she has spent time authoring the most comprehensive Kansas guidebook of all. She has traveled over 40,100 miles in two years and visited every incorporated town and some unincorporated communities in the state.

"The Kansas Guidebook for Explorers" is a full-color 432 page book with photographs, an index and guidebook tips. It is divided into six regions and broken down by county, then by community. In print just a few months, 9,000 copies of the book have been sold and a second printing is underway.

Since the publication of the new guidebook, Marci has returned to her regular duties of coordinating Kansas Explorer Club activities, hosting the Go Kansas! game show, presenting Kansas slide

shows, giving speeches statewide, facilitating retreats and organizing conferences or workshops. She also continues to write the We Kan! and Explorer newsletters and a column for Kansas! magazine.

"Receiving this award gives me a chance to talk about preserving and sustaining our rural culture," she told the crowd.

"I have a real support team, which starts with my mother and father. My mother, who is celebrating her 75th birthday, has handled every one of the 9,000 guidebooks we've sold so far. My dad is a real inspiration to me. He followed his dream compiling the guidebooks in the 1990s. He took the pictures and I wrote. One of my greatest pleasures was traveling with him.

"Many thanks to the Native Sons and Daughters board members and my family. Many more people are also working hard to help. It takes a lot of will, desire and gumption. This award is for all of them, too. They're all part of a team to keep rural Kansas alive.

"Sixty-five percent of the towns in Kansas, that's 397 towns, have less population than the number of people here tonight. People aren't

numbers, they are faces. The will and spirit of the people in our rural communities will determine whether they live or die.

"We're trying to help these people do the things innate in them to keep their towns going."

"Marci was raised on the family farm which has been in the family since 1874," said Governor Sebelius. "She was trained to be a guidance counselor and she is working today to guide rural Kansans and help them make a go of it.

"She works tirelessly to promote, preserve and sustain our state's rural culture.

"She is also working with the Kansas Rural Life Task Force in Onaga, Smith Center and rural Cowley County to promote services to rural Kansans in a new way."

Each year at the annual banquet, the Native Sons and Daughters give a prize to the oldest woman and man present. Conducting the contest this year was U.S. Senator Pat Roberts, with the help of McBride. Placing second, just out of the spotlight, was Maxine Tillotson, Topeka, who is 95 years young. She is the wife of the former state senator from Norton, the late J.C. "Chick"

Tillotson. She was president of the Native Daughters in 1960 and J.C. was president of the Native Sons in 1977. Their son, the late John Tillotson, was Native Sons president in 1993.

Monetary awards were also presented to winners of the Olive Ann Beech Kansas Factual Story contest and the Mamie Boyd Kansas! Say It Above A Whisper essay contest.

Winners of a new high school art competition, "Kansas...As Beautiful as You Think!" were recognized.

Polly Bales, an accomplished pianist from Logan, played music prior to the banquet. She has provided her piano expertise for the organization's banquet for the past

38 years! In addition to playing for the Native Sons and Daughters Banquet on Friday evening, she was the pianist for the Kansas Day Banquet on Saturday evening.

Dick Boyd, Norton, was co-vice-president of the organization this year and will be co-president next year. His grandmother, Mrs. Frank W. Boyd, Phillipsburg and Mankato, was president of the Native Daughters in 1937 and named "Kansan of the Year" in 1958.

The banquet concluded with the traditional singing in unison by those present of the Kansas song, "Home On The Range", written by Dr. Brewster Higley, Smith Center.



Kansan of the Year Martina McBride (above) visits with the crowd during the annual Native Sons and Daughters of Kansas Banquet on Friday in Topeka. From left, are, Barbara Morris, president of the Native Daughters, Don Chubb, president of the Native Sons and Distinguished Kansan Marci Penner. Maxine Tillotson, Topeka and formerly of Norton, (right) smiles as she realizes she is one of the oldest persons to attend the annual Native Sons and Daughters of Kansas Banquet on Friday in Topeka. She is wearing the medallion she received when she was president of the Native Daughters in 1960.

— Telegram photos by Larry Boyd

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