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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES

Dave Balsick is being honored with a national award from the Neighbor Works Association for his work in the Bessemer neighborhood.

Bessemer civic leader to receive national award

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

Twenty-two years ago Dave Balsick was a stranger in Bessemer.

A Pueblo native, Balsick came to the venerable South Side neighborhood looking for an inexpensive place to move his business.

Now, the longtime president of the Bessemer Association for Neighborhood Development is one of seven people in the United States receiving the NeighborWorks' Dorothy Robinson award.

Balsick is the third Pueblo recipient of the coveted national award, the most of any community in the country, according to Lionel Trujillo, director of NeighborWorks of Pueblo. The award has been in place since 1992.

Joe Manzanares was the first Puebloan to receive the award for his work in Downtown redevelopment. He was honored in 1999.

In 2003, Ersilia Cruz was recognized as an award winner for her work in Hyde Park and the West Side.

Balsick had been nominated once before.

He will receive his award Aug. 14 at a banquet in Washington, D.C.

Before he opened his business, Mountain Communications, at Central and Evans avenues,

Balsick was a kid from the other side of the river. He grew up in Belmont and graduated from East High School in 1969.

He started his business in 1976 and in 1984 began looking for a place to expand.

At the time, Bessemer was in decline and the property prices were low, but it had good access to Interstate 25, making it convenient for his police and fire clients, Balsick said.

"When you get to meet people you just fall in love with the area," Balsick said.

'To win the award, I just kind of sloughed it off. But the longer you think about it, the more cheesed you get' ± *DAVE BALSICK* He kept his business at the Central and Evans location for 19 years.

In 2003, Balsick sold a portion of it, and moved to a location on Freeway, the frontage road along Interstate 25.

But even after he moved, Balsick stayed involved with the Bessemer neighborhood.

"Sooner or later, something like that just becomes a passion," he said.

When Balsick opened his doors in Bessemer, he joined what was then called the Minnequa Redevelopment Corp.

The group was fighting to redevelop portions of the old neighborhood and helped in an effort to keep Bessemer Elementary open in the late 1990s, Balsick said.

In 2000, the school began achieving high test scores and caught the attention of Gov. Bill Owens. The work of the Minnequa Redevelopment Corp. and the Bessemer Neighborhood Association didn't go unnoticed either and a grant from the Department of Local Affairs helped merge the two agencies into the Bessemer Association for Neighborhood Development.

The list of accomplishments of the Minnequa Redevelopment Corp. and BAND is long.

Neighbors have helped improve the parks in the neighborhood, cleaned up blighted areas and improved the streetscape along Northern Avenue.

Recent projects have included the water park at the Bessemer Park pool, working with the Bessemer Historical Society and working with the city as the redevelopment of Lake Minnequa gets under way.

Other accomplishments that Balsick includes are getting neighbors to talk to each other and getting area businesses to partner with each other.

The neighborhood taverns hold a citywide training session on liquor laws and identification procedures for any liquor licensee in the city.

Other Bessemer businesses are working together to see how to better market the wealth of

restaurants and shops in the neighborhood.

The redevelopment of the neighborhood is not without its challenges, however.

The old Minnequa Bank Building is vacant and Bessemer is an aging community where half the population is aged 50 or older.

There is a risk that the generational ties, which have been the cornerstone of the neighborhood, may be slipping as the old homes are being sold off to absentee landlords.

Balsick said BAND will continue to work with experts in various fields to provide what services are needed for Bessemer residents. Some of those services include loan counseling and financial education for young families and single mothers.

Balsick said he believes the key to any redevelopment is to provide the services and amenities that children need.

That means good schools and safe places to play. These things help encourage home ownership and provide a steady market for the businesses in the neighborhood, he said.

BAND also is working closely with NeighborWorks to identify homes that need repair and then refurbish them.

"The idea is to not let any one of those houses fall into disrepair," Balsick said. "You fix the ones you can fix and the others follow around it."

Balsick jokes that City Councilman Ray Aguilera's plan is even simpler: fix the worst house on the block.

Balsick spends a lot of time working with the District 4 councilman and Aguilera has high praise for him.

"Certainly any recognition Dave would get would be appropriate," Aguilera said. "He has worked very hard for a very long time in Bessemer. He's spent a lot of time and a lot of evenings even though he doesn't live here."

Balsick was nominated for the award by NeighborWorks of Pueblo.

The award is named for Dorothy Richardson, who worked together with the residents of her aging Pittsburgh neighborhood to revitalize it. Her efforts and partnerships are credited with starting the NeighborWorks movement.

Lionel Trujillo, director of NeighborWorks of Pueblo, said Balsick was nominated for his many efforts to bring improvements to the community.

"He's just a powerhouse," Trujillo said. "He's an example of how others can get involved."

Balsick looks at the award with humility, noting that Bessemer has a tremendous amount of

potential and tools to help itself, while many of the other winners do not.

"Some of these people are really in the trenches," he said. "They don't have any resources to deal with and we've got all of these people, these businesses; everything's there in Bessemer to make it happen."

But Balsick does admit he's a little excited.

"To win the award, I just kind of sloughed it off," he said. "But the longer you think about it, the more cheesed you get."

Still, Balsick says he does his work because he owes it to the community and to the neighborhood.

"People have been asking me that question for years: 'Why do I do this?' " he said. "I believe you have to give back to the community you live in. I've been in business since 1976 and at some point you have to give back. Bessemer is as good as anywhere else."

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