

Pathfinder winners on differing roads

By Robb Murray

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MANKATO — An advocate for the disabled, a progressive company and a high school student from Somalia are this year's recipients of the annual Pathfinder Awards.

Wilbur Neuschwander-Frink will receive the Pathfinder Award, Zeynab Omar will receive the Young Pathfinder Award and Lloyd Management will receive the Business Pathfinder Award.

Please see AWARDS, Page **B3**



John Cross

The 2012 Pathfinder Awards recipients are (from left) Julie Hawker (accepting for Lloyd Management), Wilbur Neuschwander-Frink, and Zeynab Omar of Mankato East High School.

Article Continued Below

[See AWARDS on Page B03](#)

AWARDS: Advocate for disabled honored

Continued from Page B1

The awards, given annually to people who embody the spirit and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were announced at a news conference Thursday but will be bestowed Jan. 16 at the annual Martin Luther King Community Celebration.

Neuschwander-Frink has been an advocate for the disabled for 17 years. At Thursday's announcement, she talked about how she sees parallels between the work of Dr. King and the advocacy she does for people with disabilities.

"Getting a Martin Luther King Jr. award is, for me, the pinnacle," Neuschwander-Frink said.

She said advocating for the disabled has been her passion since high school when she'd watch in horror as people with disabilities were bullied and treated with disrespect. Even in high school she started standing up to that kind of treatment, even if it made her unpopular with others at her school. As a nurse, she continued her work with people with disabilities,

but it wasn't until she attended a meeting at the New Ulm Public Library for people with disabilities that she really responded to what she believes is her calling.

After that day at the library, she spent the next chapter of her life working change society's attitudes about people with disabilities.

Among her most public efforts are the plays she writes and directs featuring people with disabilities, including "Soph and Nana" and "Words."

Omar was nominated by an instructor, whose nomination letter described Omar as "a strong and positive woman with a heart of gold." Omar is somewhat unique in that she thrives in the presence of the elderly.

Unlike many of her American counterparts, she finds herself at home with them and feels compelled to help. That's why she works at an assisted living facility in Mankato where she works with residents suffering from Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

"It's rewarding, and I love what I do," she said.

Omar, who hails from Somalia, said her goal is to graduate high school and enroll at Minnesota State University where she plans to pursue nursing. Once she completes that, she hopes to travel the world to help people in poor countries. Her first stop, she says, will be Somalia.

"I feel like that's what I have to do," she said. "And that's what I want to do."

Lloyd Management Inc.

won the Pathfinder Award for a program it started to help immigrants transition into American culture.

Accepting the award for Lloyd was Julie Hawker, who works in marketing at Lloyd but her heart is more clearly in the work she's helping the company do with immigrants.

The program, which is done in partnership with MRCI Refugee Services, teaches new immigrants basic survival skills of American living, such as being a good neighbor, cleaning living spaces and how to use a washer, dryer or microwave.

Lloyd Management also sponsors a refugee family in hardship, through their "Make Yourself at Home" program.

"Each and every single person who wants to make Mankato home should have that opportunity," Hawker said.