

2008 Stamford Citizen of the Year Dick Taber honored last night at the Italian Center in Stamford

By Bill Squier

The 2008 Stamford Citizen of the Year, Dick Taber, was honored Wednesday night at the annual event's dinner at the Italian Center in Stamford

Ask Dick Taber, the chairman and CEO of First County Bank, how he feels about being named Stamford's 2008 Citizen of the Year, and he's remarkably deferential. "This award really isn't for me personally; it's for the bank," Taber insists. "My job description says that I should be a member of the community. So, I'm being honored for doing my job."



But if you ask his friends and colleagues the same question, you get a different answer. "He's thrilled. Almost like a little kid," reports last year's recipient, June Rosenthal, who was instrumental in nominating Taber for the honor. "That's because Dick's number one purpose in life is do for and give to others," she explains. "To be as much of a catalyst for good in Stamford as he can."

Each year since 1945, the Jewish War Veterans Post 142 has given the Citizen of the Year award to a civic-minded individual from the area. "We look for someone who has committed [himself or herself] to the community over a long period of time, not just someone who has had a good year," stresses Sandra Goldstein, president of the Downtown Special Services District (DSSD) and current member of the selection committee. Past recipients have included developer Frank Rich, Jr., businessman Rick Robustelli and, before she joined the committee, Goldstein herself.



When June Rosenthal suggested Taber as this year's honoree, she says that his name was immediately placed at the top of an impressive list of candidates. In fact, the committee members were astonished that he hadn't already been given the award. So they set out to rectify the situation. Taber was surprised by several dozen of his friends and family

members with the announcement of the award in early January. A dinner will be held in his honor on May 13.

June Rosenthal thinks that she knows the reason for the oversight. “He’s been around so long, quietly doing so much,” she claims. “But Dick doesn’t do anything to call attention to himself. As far as he’s concerned, you don’t have to know his name.”

Richard E. Taber was born in Ypsilanti, Mich., in 1948. There’s still a hint of the Midwest in Taber’s easy grin and the way he flattens his vowels, although his family moved to Stamford when he was in second grade. “My dad was traveling a lot and wanted a job where he’d be home more often,” Taber says of the move east. Ironically, the first company that his father worked for in Connecticut immediately sent him to California on business. So, the elder Taber changed jobs yet again and became a banker at the Irving Trust.

Taber’s family settled in Springdale, and he remembers the neighborhood as a terrific place to grow up. “I always had enough friends around to play baseball,” he recalls. “I was there until I got married.” Yet, when the time came to attend college, Taber headed back to Ypsilanti, where he studied business administration at Eastern Michigan University. Part of the school’s attraction was the large number of his relatives who lived nearby. “I had aunts and uncles, and when I visited my grandparents for the weekend, I was always welcome to do my laundry.” Taber laughs.

It was at home in Springdale, however, that Taber’s career as a banker began. “Dave Stewart, Jr., an executive vice president at Stamford Savings Bank, lived just down the street,” Taber reveals. “He was out walking his dog one day, my father was raking leaves, and they started talking.” When Taber returned home from his freshman year at college for the Christmas break, he learned that the two men had arranged for him to interview at the bank for a summer job. He was hired as a teller and spent the next three summers at Stamford Savings earning money to help pay for his education.

“It was one of the most enjoyable jobs that I’ve had because I liked talking to people,” Taber says. “And I had a new person in front of me every minute.” Working as a teller also gave him the opportunity to see how the bank was run and begin to apply what he was learning in business school.

Taber’s employers must have gotten a good look at him, too. When he graduated in 1971, they offered him a full-time job in the operations department. Taber claims that one man in particular helped him decide to accept the offer. “Richard Nixon,” he jokes. “It was a recessionary time, and jobs were scarce.”

Taber also was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the ROTC and scheduled to report for infantry officer basic training later that summer. So, he figured that the position would only be temporary. By the time he reported for military training, however, America’s commitment of troops to the war in Vietnam was being scaled back. After three months, Taber was back at the bank.

For the next 40 years, Taber rose through the ranks, becoming chairman in 1987. He oversaw the growth of the bank to 14 branches and a name change from Stamford Savings to First County Bank to reflect the expansion. Along the way, Taber also met his wife Donna. “Could it have been anywhere else but the bank?” he asks.

They first encountered one another when Donna was a teller at the Greenwich branch, and he was acting as the fill-in branch manager every other Saturday. It soon became evident to Taber, however, that he was as interested in her. The two were married in 1975.

During his early years with First County, Taber says that David Stewart, Jr., guided him toward becoming more civic-minded. “He said that a community banker needed to be a part of the community,” Taber explains. “As I got older and was getting promotions, Dave was very direct about telling me to pick out things that I was interested in and become a part of the community.”

Taber took the advice to heart. Over the last four decades, he has enlisted himself in so many worthy causes that it’s difficult to get a handle on all of them. Among the organizations that have benefited from his involvement are the Ferguson Library, the Rotary Club, Friends of ARI, the Stamford Development Corp., the Business Council of Fairfield County, Senior Services of Stamford and the Stamford Police Foundation.

June Rosenthal first became aware of Taber’s concern for the community when her company, Juner Properties, collaborated with First County on the Davenport Farm real estate development in the early 1980s. “Dick felt that Stamford’s downtown shops and restaurants were at odds with one another because there was nothing to hold them together,” she says. “And they thought that the Town Center Mall was going to destroy their businesses.” Taber participated in the formation of the Stamford Downtown Council and later served as the president of the board of the Downtown Special Services District. “And downtown Stamford blossomed,” Rosenthal adds.

“He was an extraordinarily dedicated president,” says Sandy Goldstein. “The positions that the DSSD takes on development are often highly controversial. I knew that I could rely on Dick to look at each issue and be absolutely objective.” Goldstein says that she was particularly appreciative of Taber’s support when she had to articulate policies that were less than popular. “He’s strong morally, and he sticks to it,” she emphasizes.

The issue of providing Stamford with affordable housing is one that has also commanded much of Taber’s attention. “Housing is one of the most basic needs,” he stresses. “If you’re not sure where you’re going to sleep tonight, you can’t move on to the next issue.” Thus, he was involved with the establishment of the Housing Development Fund and has worked on behalf of organizations such as New Neighborhoods, Inc.

The importance that Taber places on helping people find places to live is mirrored in his bank’s business practices. “More than half of First County’s assets are in first mortgages

on single-family homes,” he points out. It’s a strategy that has not only fostered local development and considerable goodwill but also paid unexpected dividends. By lending primarily to area homeowners and businesses, First County has avoided much of the financial turmoil experienced by other large, national institutions.

Taber widened the scope of his civic activities when the bank founded the First County Bank (FCB) Foundation in 2001. “We’re different from most of the banks in town in that we’re not owned by shareholders,” he explains. The foundation was established to provide the bank with a direct means of giving back to the city that has been supporting the bank since 1851.

Taber’s charitable efforts through the FCB Foundation have had the added benefit of encouraging support from others. For example, Dr. Michael Ego, associate vice provost of UConn Stamford, reports that Taber’s initial support of the college’s University Pals program led to its ongoing success. “The foundation donated funds for first-generation, college-bound, middle school children in Stamford and Norwalk to attend a three-week college simulation program at the Stamford campus. It’s a brand-new concept,” Dr. Ego says. “As a result of First County Bank taking the risk, other funders agreed. It’s a testimony to the respect that people have for Dick.”

As notable as Taber’s charitable giving has been, people are even more eager to talk about the man behind the money. “I adore him!” Sandy Goldstein states emphatically. “He’s wonderful, open, sensitive and articulate.” Dr. Ego agrees. “He’s very kind hearted,” he says. “But also a good business person.” Ego says that he can always count on Taber for a candid opinion about plans for the UConn Stamford campus. “And he’s an avid UConn basketball fan,” Ego says. “What I like about him is his humility,” adds Rosenthal. “He’s funny, [he] loves to smile and he’s a family man.”

Taber’s immediate clan includes two married daughters, a son, a pair of tiny granddaughters and a trio of grandsons he affectionately refers to as “the knotheads.” And despite the demands of his job and his community involvement, a few times a year, he and his son Jim slip away to go fly-fishing in the Farmington River. “It’s a nice, peaceful way to clear your mind,” Taber reports. “When you start angling against a fish rising across the stream, you don’t worry about interest rates.”