

## **Citizens for a Fair Ferndale (CFF) Good Neighbor Awards**

**April 19, 2011**

### **Frank O'Donnell and Helen Weber**

Frank and Helen have lived in Ferndale for a combined 100 years. Frank moved here in 1941 when his father, former City Commissioner William O'Donnell, moved his family here from Detroit. They are the second of four generations of O'Donnells in Ferndale. Helen arrived in Ferndale in 1971 after marrying Frank. Over the course of their time in Ferndale, they have been deeply involved in myriad community improvement organizations, political campaigns, and causes. The foundation of that involvement is a heartfelt knowledge of and concern for their literal neighbors. They truly get to know their neighbors: names, kids, pets, jobs, problems and joys.

One can't list all of the causes to which they've freely given their time, energy and resources. Prior to CFF, Frank and Helen joined FANS, continuing their strong commitment to anti-racism action. This quickly branched out to FANS' fight against homophobia and to three campaigns for a Human Rights Ordinance (Frank was the treasurer for all three campaigns, in addition to serving many candidates in that capacity). Helen's leadership and activism produced two separate stints on the Ferndale City Council (spanning two centuries: 74-78 and 2000-2005) and a run for Mayor.

Frank and Helen have an abiding dedication to our public schools as well. They were among the founders of Citizens for Better Schools (CBS). CBS itself came from "Freedom to Learn" which was led by Ed Sharples to promote intellectual freedom, challenging a group of citizens and school board members who were interested in banning certain books from classrooms. Their school involvement culminated in Frank's election to the Ferndale School Board in 1975, where he served as Board President from 1977 through 1980. Among the accomplishments that Frank is most proud of is the peaceful integration of Ferndale's schools.

To this day, they not only remain involved in the evenings and weekend, but also during the work week. Frank volunteers at Common Ground in Pontiac, in the finance department three days and at Peace Action of Michigan two days per week, where he is the organization's Treasurer. Helen volunteers at least 40 hours per week at Peace Action. She currently serves as co-chair of Peace Action's national Board, having previously been co-chair of the Michigan Board. Helen also serves on the Board of Ferndale's Memorial Day Parade Committee and is Treasurer of the Ferndale Community Foundation.

They both attribute their deep commitment to social justice to their parents, and in particular their fathers. Frank's father was a UAW organizer and a member of Walter Reuther's coalition that committed the UAW to racial and social justice, including integrating the auto factories. Helen's father provided a broad worldview as well as a profound respect for the diverse people that he met on his job as a mail carrier. They took their childhood formation into religious vocations.

Helen became a sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, where both she and the order developed greater social commitments (and from which she remains on a leave of absence). Frank became a priest, where he met the great Monsignor Clement Kern, whose love for the poor was truly saintly. Then, in the 1960s, the assistant pastor at St. Anne's in Warren met the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher at St. Anne's school. Their romance developed to Ferndale's great benefit. Frank and Helen's extended family is another important part of their lives, and they are loved by many sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews. Frank and Helen's living legacy to Ferndale runs deep.