**Columbia Town Center Rotary Valentine’s Gala**

On February 6th, the Columbia Town Center Rotary Club held their annual fundraiser. The event, which was attended by 150 people, included a cocktail hour with classical guitarist, buffet dinner, dancing, and silent auction of over 50 items to raise money for local charities.

“We started the gala six years ago,” remarks Sharon Waligora, chairperson for the event, “It was fun and successful then, and it gets even better every year.” This event enables the Columbia Town Center Rotary Club to support more than 20 charitable organizations in the community, through donations and actual engagement from Rotarian members.

This year, the Columbia Town Center Rotary Club introduced its inaugural community citizen award - “Citizens Who Make a Difference Award”. This award recognizes individuals who have identified a need in our community and, through their leadership and will, have made a difference in the lives of many within our community. Everyday citizens that initiated a program or project to address a challenge being faced by a portion of our community; a challenge that has been softened and/or relieved through their leadership, volunteer work and the enlistment of others in the same effort. This year’s honorees are Carol Hill from Mt. Zion Church and Jomo Fowlkes and Lauren Robinson from Howard County Public School System.

Lauren Robinson and Jomo Fowlkes were recognized for their work to start and build the Blessing in a Backpack/Food for Kids Program at Running Brook Elementary School. They started a program that supplies child-friendly, easily prepared food for the weekends and holidays for each child in need, sending it home in a backpack each weekend. Initially funded from private funds and a supportive principal it began receiving the help of the Columbia Town Center Rotary Club and the Mt. Zion Open Doors Food Pantry, which allowed their program to offer more nutritious foods and reach more children in their community. While Jomo Fowlkes was unable to attend and will be recognized at an upcoming Rotary meeting, Lauren Robinson was accompanied by friends and family. Also present were Mrs. Ellen Giles (Vice-Chairwoman, Board of Education) and Mr. Troy Todd (Principal, Running Brook Elementary School).

The sentiment ever present throughout the evening was a resounding and heartfelt “Thank You”. Says David Rodriguez, club president, “while there are those in need, we will be here to support and we will continue to recognize citizens who are bold enough to come out of the shadows to galvanize resources, people and effort to address pain and hurt in our community. We also want to thank our generous sponsors and guests whose support provides funding that will help our locally supported charities.”