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Honored by Packers for community service, Port man donates $1,000 to preservation group

Rick Smith, who has devoted countless hours to the Port Washington Historical Society and its Light Station museum, was honored as a Community Quarterback by the Green Bay Packers last week.

Smith was one of 20 residents from around the state who received awards for volunteer work during a dinner at the Legends Club inside the Lambeau Field Atrium Thursday, Jan. 21.

The Community Quarterback program, which is in its 10th year, is funded by the Packers and NFL Charities. Each winner received $1,000 for their agency.

Smith was modest when asked about the honor Monday, saying, “I think there are other people who deserve it more.”

He said he is donating $500 of his prize to the Historical Society to purchase new windows for the Light Station and the remainder to the Historical Society’s endowment fund.

Smith, who taught math and science in the Port-Saukville School District for 34 years, said he hopes the donations will inspire others to contribute to the society, noting the group's mission of preserving the city's history and heritage is vitally important.

"You only know where you're going if you know where you came from," he said.

To say Smith is passionate about history and preservation would be an understatement.

He is an outspoken proponent of preserving historic buildings. If the Historical Society hadn't stepped up to take over the Light Station, the 1860 lighthouse would likely have been sold and razed for development.

"You have to preserve and save what you have," he said. "If Port's going to continue to live off tourism, there has to be something other than the lake to bring people here.

"The Light Station right now is probably the No. 1 tourist attraction in the city. And still, there are people here who don't know about it.

"We have to make people conscious of what we have. We have so many new people in town who don't realize what a gem this is."

Smith was nominated for the Community Quarterback award by Jackie Oleson, vice president of the Port Washington Historical Society.

"He's a very giving person," Oleson said. "As a community, it's important to point out some of these very giving people."

Smith was not only instrumental in obtaining, renovating and establishing the Light Station museum operated by the society, but he has been there whenever needed.

"He steps up every time we have something that needs to be done," Oleson said.

When the society moved into its new offices, she said, "He just started dropping in to see us and pitching in."

Smith also put together historical displays in downtown store windows for Maritime Heritage Festival and organized a maritime museum for the festival, she said.

But Smith's involvement doesn't end at the Light Station or with the Historical Society, Oleson said.

"He does things people don't even know," she said.

He is active in his church, works with Interfaith Caregivers and helps a number of elderly people, she said.

Smith is always willing to share his knowledge of the city, Lake Michigan and its shipwrecks, she said.

He promotes the city in numerous ways, Oleson said. Last spring, he traveled to visitor's centers from Illinois into Wisconsin and distributed materials about Port and the Light Station.

POSING OUTSIDE THE Port Washington Light Station, a historic lighthouse he helped renovate, was Rick Smith, who last week was honored by the Green Bay Packers as a Community Quarterback for his volunteer work. Smith received $1,000 from the Packers and NFL Charities, and will donate half the money to window replacement at the Light Station and the rest to the Port Washington Historical Society endowment fund. Photo by Sam Arendt