

## TCOG Announces 2016 Better Leader Award Recipients

SHERMAN, September 22, 2016 – Susan B. Thomas, PhD, Executive Director of Texoma Council of Governments (TCOG) announced the Cooke, Fannin, Grayson and Texoma Region “Better Leader Award” recipients, all of whom were recognized and presented with awards last week during TCOG’s 2016 Annual Event.

“The purpose of our Annual Event is to take one night a year to very purposefully and intentionally celebrate our collective accomplishments,” Dr. Thomas stated. “However, the work of these individuals deserves special recognition as they have each demonstrated a sincere desire to be better leaders and improve quality of life in our communities.”

Dr. Thomas further explained these awards were previously known as the “Citizen of the Year” awards but felt the name change was appropriate and is more aligned with TCOG’s vision of Better Leaders Building Better Lives. The recipients of the awards are as follows: Ms. Patty Haayen, Cooke County; Judge Lauri Blake, Fannin County; Mr. Bob Rhoden, Grayson County; and Mr. Britton Brooks, Texoma Region. Each recipient was selected by a panel of TCOG Governing Board members from their respective counties.

Patty Haayen, Cooke County recipient has a remarkable skill for organization and a passionate drive to help others. Since she moved to Gainesville in 1979, Patty has taught Sunday School at Whalen United Methodist Church and served on their finance committee as well as serving as a trustee, chaired the Pastor Parish Relations and organized their annual Chicken Spaghetti Supper. She started and chaired Friends of the Family, a support group for battered women, where she answered the hotline for five years. This group is now known as Abigail’s Arms. Mrs. Haayen served on numerous committees at United Way of Cooke County and has served as President.

For 24 years, Patty served as President of Morton Museum and ran the charity auction every year. She has served for 20 years on the Gainesville Parks board where she is currently the chair. For the last 10 years, Patty has served on the Gainesville Housing Authority Board. Mrs. Haayen has coached the Lindsay High School extemporaneous and persuasive speaking teams for over 20 years and is the only coach to win 1st, 2nd and 3rd in a single event at State since 1986. She has also helped with fundraising for the Gainesville Community Playground, Gainesville Boys and Girls Club, Treasurer for Friends of the Library.

Judge Lauri Blake, Fannin County recipient was elected judge of the 336th State District Court on November 2, 2004 and is presently seeking her fourth term. She is the first female elected to serve as a District Judge in Grayson and Fannin counties. She has presided over the Fannin County Drug Court for 12 years working to rehabilitate people on felony probation who also have drug and alcohol addictions.

Judge Blake serves on a variety of committees within the justice system including the Criminal Justice Committee which is responsible for administering the Fannin County Justice system. Judge Blake serves as Chairman of the Fannin County Juvenile Board which oversees the Fannin County Juvenile Services Department.

Prior to serving as judge, Judge Blake was the First Assistant Grayson County Criminal District Attorney for 4 years, served as a Special Assistant United States Attorney, and was an Assistant Criminal District Attorney in Collin County for 7 years. As First Assistant Criminal District Attorney to Joe Brown, she helped

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establish law and order policies for the prosecution of criminal cases with a special focus on prosecution of offenses against children, drug dealers, and repeat offenders.

Judge Blake received her law degree from the Southern Methodist University School of Law. Prior to attending law school, Judge Blake was a Dallas Police officer, graduating at the top of her police academy class. She participates in the training of Court Appointed Special Advocates (“CASA”) which serve the 336th District Court by advocating on behalf of children in CPS care.

Judge Blake is a member of the Bonham Kiwanis Club where she presently serves as President. She is also a member of the Bonham Rotary Club. Judge Blake serves as Chairman of the EcoTourism Committee of BEST – FEST, and is a member of the Bois D’arc Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist. Judge Blake is a hobby beekeeper and a member of the Texas Bluebird Society.

Previous service and participation include:

Founding Board Member and Secretary of the Grayson County Children’s Advocacy Center, Planning and Zoning Commissioner for City of Allen, Texas, President of Grayson County Young Lawyers Association, President of Collin County Young Lawyers Association, Texas State Bar Grievance Committee member, American Red Cross (Cooke, Fannin Grayson) Board Member, Keep Sherman Beautiful board member, Friends of the Sherman Library Board Member, Board Member for MADD Metroplex Chapter (Dallas/Ft. Worth), Friend of Sam Rayburn Board Member, Fannin County Sports Hall of Fame Board Member, Collin County Hobby Beekeepers Association Member, Upward Basketball Coach and Little Dribblers Coach, and Sunday School teacher.

Judge Blake has been married to Randall A. Blake for 19 years and they are the proud parents of two children; Randy 17 and Suzi 15.

Bob Rhoden, Grayson County recipient, is proud to be a Texan whose humorous stories are colored with Texas overtones (and so are his clothes). Bob holds the title of Distinguished Toastmaster so if he doesn’t have a real-life story to fit an occasion, he can quickly spin a tall Texas tale that’s just perfect. One of his favorite quotes is, “All I ever really needed to know, I learned from my Granny!” Those who know him best, realize Granny imparted an enormous amount of wisdom to her grandson through her Texas adages.

When Bob is not entertaining, he works as the Executive Director of Four Rivers Outreach where he spends most of his time helping people with a second chance at life. With over 25 years of management experience, Bob enjoys helping people reach their social, spiritual and employment potential. Bob’s past experience at TCOG, the armored car industry, sales, adult education, and 16 years at Workforce Solutions Texoma has equipped him with much good advice and many humorous stories. His passion for working with youth has landed him several jobs as youth pastor and inspired him to volunteer with the Denison Youth Leadership Group.

In addition to his regular job, Mr. Rhoden is an accomplished grant writer, a small business owner and community volunteer extraordinaire. He has served on the Denison Chamber Board, the North Texas Youth Connection Board, the Denison Young Professionals, the Denison Education Foundation, the Denison Boys and Girls Club Board, the Grayson Literacy Team, the Center for Workplace Learning Advisory Board and currently is a Denison School Board member.

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Bob and his wife, Loretta, live in Denison. Together they have two sons, Koby a senior at Denison High School and Kyle, a 7th grader at Scott Middle School.

Britton Brooks, Texoma Region recipient has and continues to have a positive impact on our community. One of his greatest passions is for the youth and the underprivileged as he dedicates selfless hours every week to this cause from a classroom setting to a one on one game on the court. He believes spending time, working with, interacting and encouraging this age group of today - will make for a better tomorrow as they move forward in life choices. He is currently giving a series of educational seminars on the proper ways for youth to interact with law enforcement.

Brooks serves on the board of trustees for the Sherman Independent School District, Wilson N. Jones Regional Medical Center, the Sherman Chamber of Commerce, the Grayson County Crisis Center, the Sherman Education Foundation, the Sherman Kiwanis Club, Women Rock, and the Austin College Alumni Association. He is also a proud graduate of Leadership Sherman Class of 2015, Leadership Denison Class of 2016, and a member of the North Texas Young Professionals and the Grayson County Law Enforcement Association. Brooks was also nominated as the 2015 Sherman Community Leader of the Year and chosen as the Herald Democrat's Best of Texoma Community Volunteer in 2016.

TCOG also announced its 2016 Employee of the Year, Janice Thorne. Each year staff from TCOG nominate a fellow colleague to recognize for their exemplary performance and interpersonal skills. Mrs. Thorne is a Money Management Specialist and is admired and respected by everyone who works with her.

The Annual Event guest speaker, Jim Ott gave a delightfully entertaining presentation to the audience, discussing the importance of early childhood reading and involvement of parents in their children's lives and how they are key factors in developing successful leaders. Mr. Ott is a school psychologist with Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency based in Davenport, IA. He has served students in rural Jackson County for the past 32 years. He lives in Dubuque with his wife of 32 years, Teresa. They have four children aged 17-26. Jim is a national consultant with aha!Process and the Bridges Out of Poverty material ([www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com)). He is a co-founder of the Dubuque Circles Initiative which is actively applying Bridges Out of Poverty concepts at the community level. Jim is also active in his community through his church, First Baptist, where he has been a member for 31 years. Other interests and hobbies include playing and coaching youth soccer, Community Theater and playing music with his daughters in their Irish band called Ballyheigue.

The Texoma Council of Governments is a voluntary association of the local governments in Cooke, Fannin, and Grayson Counties. Established in 1968, the Texoma Council of Governments promotes economy and efficiency in the coordinated planning and development of the tri-county region through its community and economic development activities. Either directly, or through contractors, the Council provides housing, utility assistance, and weatherization services for low-income citizens in the region and assists the elderly through a variety of Area Agency on Aging programs. The Council also facilitates the delivery of grant funding for homeland security and criminal justice.

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