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## Susan Widmayer given Concern Award

By BABETTE SULLIVAN

It came as no surprise to her friends and co-workers when Susan M. Widmayer became a finalist for the Health Foundation of South Florida's Concern Awards.

"It's her leadership that manifests itself in the number of families that we help and the impact that she has on them," said Stephanie Clayton, coordinator of community relations at the Children's Diagnostic Treatment Center in Fort Lauderdale, where Widmayer is executive director.

Widmayer was one of five to win a \$10,000 Concern Award, which she may donate to a charity of her choice. She said it spotlights the work that needs to be done with children who have disabilities and chronic illnesses.

"There are thousands of children in South Florida who have all sorts of problems," Widmayer said. "Their families need a lot of information and support so that they can make sure their children develop to their maximum potential."

Widmayer, who received a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Miami, said her sister's life-changing experience with a psychologist at Georgetown University inspired her to pursue the profession.

Her sister, Mary Beth, had failed kindergarten and was failing the first grade. Doctors said she was developmentally challenged.

No one could identify her condition until a Georgetown doctor diagnosed her with a serious visual impairment. After Mary Beth started using glasses, her life -- and the life of the entire family -- was transformed.

The events sparked a desire that has ultimately helped many children in need.

"If my parents hadn't been able to take her to a place like that, Lord knows what could have happened," Widmayer said. "There are reasons why you sort of catch on fire about things. It's your own experiences that change your life."

Widmayer recalled another career sparker.

"Children who seemed to be doing well would suddenly catch pneumonia and die," said Widmayer, who began her career as a pediatric psychologist at the University of Miami's Mailman Center for Child Development. "We did not know why until we discovered that these children needed to be tested for HIV."

This need inspired Widmayer to found the Children's Diagnostic Treatment Center at a time when Broward County had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country.

The only non-university site in the United States for pediatric HIV/AIDS clinical trials supported by the National Institutes of Health, the center has access to the most recent and most effective medication for patients.

The center also plays a role in the latest AIDS research, such as one study that helped identify the mechanism for the transmission of HIV and AIDS from mother to child.

Now in its 26th year, the Children's Diagnostic and Treatment Center has helped more than 11,000 children in Broward County.

Its staff of 170 physicians, nurses, therapists and social workers provide care to medically fragile infants, children and teens with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

As the center's executive director, Widmayer finds herself working long hours in the office but said it does not take much work to reconnect with her inspiration.

"If I ever get bogged down with paperwork, all I have to do is go out to the waiting room and talk to or see the children," she said. "They're impressive, these kids."

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