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# Local philanthropist earns Ellis Island Medal of Honor

May 13, 2013 | By Doreen Hemlock, SunSentinel

In just three years, Fort Lauderdale resident Noreen Salah Burpee has helped distribute \$8 million to nonprofits, heading up a new foundation created from wealth earned by her immigrant family.

On Saturday, her work was honored with the prestigious Ellis Island Medal of Honor recognizing the contributions of immigrants in America. She shared the stage with actress Mia Farrow and singer Dionne Warwick among 100 honorees in such diverse fields as art, science, politics and philanthropy.

"I never dreamed I would be picked for this medal," said Burpee, executive director of The Salah Foundation, which funds and helps nonprofits nationwide and especially in South Florida.

"This really honors my Lebanese-Christian grandparents who came to this country with no English-language skills and prospered," she said. "And it's for my uncle, a self-made millionaire, who had a piece of the American dream. He believed that you couldn't take from the world and not give something back."

Burpee long worked for her uncle, the late George Salah of Boca Raton, who made a fortune in construction and real estate over three decades in South Florida. On his death a few years ago, he left a charitable trust that now has been developed into The Salah Foundation that she runs.

This year, the family foundation plans to distribute about \$5 million to charities nationwide, much of that in Broward and Palm Beach counties. It generally help smaller nonprofits with matching grants that kick in when the nonprofit raises that amount of money – or more - from other funders.

"We're not a check-writing foundation," said Burpee. "We see ourselves as partners in philanthropy," helping nonprofits find new ways to raise cash, strategize, operate and fulfill their missions.

For nonprofit Broward Health Systems, a \$250,000 challenge from The Salah Foundation helped mobilize more than \$1 million to upgrade cancer-treatment facilities and refined the group's marketing, said Dennis L. Stefanacci, senior vice president of the health group and chief of its charitable arm.

“They showed us the power of one gift to be a call to action,” said Stefanacci. “We’ve been very fortunate to form a close relationship and partnership with Noreen, her son George and their board.”

Stefanacci used to work as consultant for the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations or NECO, which sponsors the Ellis Island Medals of Honor. He was so impressed with Burpee that he nominated her for the award – his first recommendation ever for the honor that has bestowed even on Nobel prize winners and six U.S. presidents.

As many as 1,000 people are nominated yearly for the medals sponsored by a coalition of immigrant organizations that advocate diversity and help preserve the Ellis Island monument in New York harbor.

Burpee said the honor energizes her to fulfill the mission of her family foundation: to help others especially children at risk, families in need, medical research and community development. She calls leaders of nonprofits “the real heroes,” people like Abby Mosher who turn personal tragedy into something positive to help a broad swath of the community.

Mosher, whose husband died in a car accident, started Tomorrow’s Rainbow in Coconut Creek to help children like her own cope with grief. The Salah Foundation recently offered her nonprofit a \$30,000 challenge grant to build a barn for horses and other animals used in grief-therapy at the group’s ranch.

“Noreen embodies the American dream,” said Mosher, “because she’s about giving the underdog and grass-roots organizations the tools to succeed.”

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#### The Salah Foundation

What: Private family foundation in Fort Lauderdale.

Mission: Supports nonprofits in the United States that strengthen families and communities and advance individuals to become productive and responsible citizens.

Funding: Invites applications. In three years, distributed about \$8 million to some 80 charities, many in South Florida. Aims to distribute \$5 million this year.

Executive director: Noreen Salah Burpee, winner of the 2013 Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

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