

# THE EVERETT HERALD

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## Mary Toews recognized for her work in sharing arts with youth

By Sharon Salyer  
Herald Writer

EVERETT — Mary Toews isn't used to being in the spotlight. So being selected as one of two winners of a ChangeMaker Award has left her feeling a little overwhelmed.

"I have butterflies in my tummy," she said. "Now I get all this attention. I don't know what to say."

The award is scheduled to be presented to Toews on Thursday morning as part of a health conference, "At the Edge of Amazing," at Xfinity Arena. Thursday's event, and the ChangeMaker Awards, are sponsored by Providence's Institute for a Healthier Community.

The awards recognize an individual or organization that have helped make their community a better place. The nonprofit Familias Unidas, which provides services to Spanish-speaking and immigrant groups in Snohomish County, also will receive an award.

If Toews is a little shy about talking about her work as founder of Mari's Place in Everett, others have recognized its value. Though operating out of tiny space at 3101 Hoyt Ave. in Everett, her work with youth was awarded a \$9,200 grant this year from United Way of Snohomish County and the Greater Everett Community Foundation.

Toews, 54, was born in Mexico and was a kindergarten teacher before returning to higher education to earn degrees in business and international law.

She came to the United States in 1986, initially to visit Disneyland. She met Brian Toews, who was serving in the Navy and based in San Diego. The couple married and they have been together for 27 years. They live in Lake Stevens.

Toews said she got the money to start Mari's Place by returning to Mexico and selling a house and apartment. Toews said her inspiration for starting the center came from her son, also named Brian, who needed emergency heart surgery at Seattle Children's Hospital when he was 4 years old.

As he grew up, he developed a strong interest in the arts, rather than sports. "There are many children not playing sports and they need to express all the skills they hide inside themselves," she said.

Her son, 24, will teach English and drama



Mary Toews and Adam Ballout, Vice President of Mari's Place.



Change Makers Award, 2015, awarded to Mary Toews.

classes at Glacier Peak High School in Snohomish beginning this fall.

Toews' work at Mari's Place began with a group of five children. Its programming has now grown to a dozen or more classes a week. Toews asks families to pay \$10 a class if they can afford it. If not, "We give kids scholarships," she said.

There are no paid staff. Mari's Place continues to operate through grants and donations. "We are growing and it costs a lot of money," she said. "Art is very expensive, with painting, brushes, paper, keyboards, saxophones, clarinets, violins, and guitars." That's in addition to dance classes, such as ballet, that

are offered there. "We buy all the equipment for the kids, such as shoes, and the parents sew the skirts for the dancing classes," she said.

"I am really, really humbled," she said of being selected for the ChangeMaker Award. "I just want to help the children in the community. That's all I want to do. Anybody needs help, I'm here. I do what I can."

Familias Unidas first began offering services at the South Everett Neighborhood Center in 2000. "We saw the community growing with Latinos," which is how the group grew out of the neighborhood center, said Sophia Beltran, a family support program manager. Familias Unidas offers a variety of services. One program teaches elementary, middle and high school students about their heritage and allows them to meet artists, scientists and other professionals. "We share the accomplishments of Latinos," she said.

Adult classes are offered on parenting skills, citizenship, computer literacy and financial education. Classes are offered in Spanish on cooking, health and diabetes, in cooperation with Lynnwood's Verdant Health Commission, she said.

Familias Unidas is developing a pilot program in Spanish with Seattle's Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center on surviving cancer. It will serve men who have been treated for any type of cancer and for women who have been treated for breast cancer. It is expected to begin in the fall, she said.

Familias Unidas has helped provide low-cost and free mammograms to women through funding from the Susan G. Komen foundation.

The organization was nominated for the ChangeMaker Award by Tami Farber, a vice president of equity, advancement and global engagement for YMCA of Snohomish County.

Farber called Familias Unidas, a program of Lutheran Community Services NW, a critical organization for Snohomish County. "The staff is some of the most dedicated people I've experienced," she said. "They're community-minded, civically engaged and about ensuring access to all people regardless of income status or anything that might be a barrier to someone having access to support services."

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