

## Two Jewish grads among UMKC alumni-group honorees

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The University of Missouri-Kansas City Alumni Association will recognize two members of the Jewish community — one posthumously — at its 2010 Alumni Awards luncheon Thursday, April 22, at Pierson Auditorium in the University Center.

Artist Rita Blitt will receive the Spotlight Award, while the late advocate for those with physical disabilities, Paul Levy, will be honored with the association's "Defying the Odds" award. They are among six major award winners to be honored at the luncheon.

### Rita Blitt

Blitt, who received a bachelor of arts degree from UMKC in 1952, has donated two sculptures to her alma mater. They are among 38 of her sculptures on public display around town, Blitt said in an interview this week at her Leawood home and studio.

The award program mentions her other accomplishments, which include having her artwork in museum collections around the world to her partnership with the David Parsons Dance Company and their collaborative film, "Caught in Paint," which was shown at Cannes in 2008, among 130 other film festivals.

Blitt draws, paints and creates sculptures. She looks back at her career now and can identify several different "breakthrough" works. But she said she considers drawing to be the basis of all of her artwork.



Rita Blitt with one of her paintings in a 2009 photo.

"In 1975, I walked up to my yellowball sculpture, which had been installed at Oak Park Mall," Blitt recalled. "It was my baby at six feet tall. It was one of my first large works. And I said 'This feels more like me than anything I have ever created.' It came from a one-inch doodle, and suddenly I realized that those doodles were the essence of me, and if I was going to be creating art and putting it out into the world, I needed to put out the essence of me.

"I went home and bought six drawing pads and filled them with my doodles — now drawings — on good paper. And when the six pads were full, I went out and bought six more."

Blitt said she has been inspired by artists near (the late Kansas City watercolorist Frank James) and far (mobile master Alexander Calder) to pursue her artwork virtually every day.

One of Blitt's most popular works, as noted in the alumni magazine article, is surely the poster she created for the STOP Violence Coalition, illustrating the phrase she coined: "Kindness is Contagious: Catch It!"

Using her artwork in this way is part of Blitt's spiritual belief system. In fact, she said, she is contemplating a plan to give away more of her works to not-for-profit entities.

She and her husband, developer Irwin Blitt, have generously supported many local charities, including some that have benefited UMKC and its Conservatory of Music. Lately, they made a lead gift to help establish the Blitt Family Creative Arts Center at the new homeless-teen shelter north of the river operated by Synergy Services.

Blitt's next area show opens Sept. 11 at the Lawrence, Kan., Arts Center. It's her traveling exhibit, "Fear of War, Courage to Hope While Dancing." It was inspired by the first Iraq War in 1991, she said, but seems relevant in a nation still embroiled in overseas conflicts.

### **Paul Levy**

While fighting multiple sclerosis, Paul Levy, a 1971 UMKC grad, became a powerful force in improving the lives of people with disabilities.

Levy's first career was in the field of newspapers, magazines and advertising. However, according to an article in the UMKC Alumni Association's Perspectives magazine, "his legacy lives on in his efforts to help others. Levy helped make UMKC facilities and programs accessible to current and future students, and he worked to improve transportation throughout Kansas City."

Levy, who died in November at age 63, founded The Whole Person Center for Independent Living, an organization that helps people with disabilities live productive, independent lives, and Andrew's Way Transitional Housing for people with mental illness. He also helped launch the Rehabilitation Institute's Independent Living Services program, served as director of the Coalition for Independence and used a grant to establish training programs for in-home care providers.

An avid writer, Levy authored the book "Rising up, Falling, Then Rising Higher," plus hundreds of articles for regional and national newspapers and magazines.

The alumni association notes that Levy received the Dorothy Davis Citizen Award from the Kansas City Consensus group, the Distinguished Service Award from the Missouri Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities and the National Multiple Sclerosis Achievement Award. But those are just some highlights.

"If you could see the walls of his office, they are completely covered in honorary plaques," Paul Levy's widow, Marianne Levy, said this week. She said Paul Levy "would be appreciative" of receiving this latest award, were he alive today, "but he wouldn't be blown away by it."

Marianne Levy said she plans to attend the awards luncheon with her sons, Peter and Stephen Krull.

Retired Missouri State Representative Bill Boucher paid tribute to Paul Levy, saying "In life, sometimes we are fortunate to find a real hero who affects our way of thinking,"