

The Women's Center Angel Award - Michelle Barrett Ferrier, Daytona Beach

Nominated in the Category of Innovative by Kari Cobham -

Chosen by the Women's Center

When the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated over the blue Texas skies five years ago, a stunned Ferrier held her scared children close and struggled for honest words to explain death to a 4-, 7- and 10-year-old. To share and explore her grief, the then News-Journal night editor wrote and published the emotional experience. That first intimate glimpse into her life became "Chasing Rainbows", a bi-monthly column of thoughtful musings on everything from politics and ethnicity to the struggles of a semi-suburban wife and mother.

One thing Ferrier acknowledged as she wrote about personal and broader issues in a very public way was that not everyone was so lucky. What people needed was a voice, a forum, a place they could go to tell their own stories. When the idea for a citizen journalist Web site began percolating at The News-Journal in 2007, Ferrier stepped in, growing the project seed into an online community with local focus on the people, places and things that make Volusia and Flagler counties what they are.

Since its launch, MyTopiaCafé.com has grown into an active community of about 2,200 local registered users, who have posted more than 10,000 stories, events and photos. But more importantly, it's given locals a place to interact, share their lives, and read and contribute to community news.

While working and balancing the demands of being a wife and mother to her two daughters and son, Ferrier recently received her doctoral degree in Texts and Technology from the University of Central Florida. Her ideas about technology and community became the center of her doctoral thesis project which is based on a digital quilt where stories of Hurricane Katrina and its survivors were linked and woven through the web text. The "stitched narrative" demonstrated "the power of these digital fragments to piece together an alternate history" and allowed users to create their own quilt patches and share their stories.

Ferrier also contributes to E-Media Tidbits, Poynter Institute's group weblog. She is a guest lecturer at B-CU and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University on new media, citizen journalism and social media, and a member of the education committee of the Digital Media Education Consortium of Central Florida. As a community member at PACE Center for Girls, Ferrier does advocacy for the group that supports alternative education opportunities for at risk girls.

Michelle's work on MyTopiaCafe and within the community—as respected journalist, Web guru, mother, wife, neighbor and friend—shows beyond sincerity a strong and amazing woman unafraid to create, to break ground, to meet challenges head on, all in the name of giving the people around her a voice and a place to call their own. She sought to rebuild the fabric of a community, a sense of place and time that's been lost, and judging by the site's loyal following, I'd say she succeeded—and then some.