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Warren resident Jeff Souder (left) receives the 2018 Samuel Jones Pioneer Award from the 2017 winner, Wendel Brown, during the annual breakfast held Friday, June 29, in the Knight Bergman Center. After receiving the award, Souder made an announcement officially opening the 51st annual Salamonie Summer Festival. Photo by Rebecca Sandlin.

Surprised, honored Souder joins ranks of Samuel Jones winners

By REBECCA SANDLIN
Jeff Souder thought perhaps he didn't deserve to join a select group of Warren residents who have received the town's prestigious Samuel Jones Pioneer Award. But when 2017 award recipient Wendel Brown said, "We had to go clear to East of Chicago to get this guy," Souder knew he had been tapped for the 30th annual award. "I'm very honored and very surprised," Souder said. "What an honor it is to join such a group here in Warren."

The accolade, named for the founder of Warren, is presented each year to a member of the community who exemplifies the leadership and "spirit of a small town," was presented to Souder at the annual breakfast Friday, June 29, at the Knight Bergman Center and kicks off the 51st annual Salamonie Summer Festival.

Souder and his wife, Becky, are the owners of the East of Chicago Pizza shop in Warren. He is past president of Historic Warren, an Indiana Mainstreet program, and currently serves on the steering committee with his wife. He attends Community Exchanges and has been instrumental in raising funds to support the structural and façade grant programs in downtown Warren, while working with Indiana Landmarks to administer those grant programs. He also serves on the executive board of Huntington County Economic Development and is active in his church, serving in various leadership roles.

Brown said Souder has been committed to the Warren area community from early on. He was a volunteer emergency medical services driver before the units were professionally staffed, and a member of Salamonie Active Men, working on projects such as the Haunted House, Labor Day tractor pull, Christmas tree sales and SAM Olympics.

"Volunteering for the Pulse Opera House, he was part of the group that rescued old theater seats from another location that are still in use in the local venue," Brown said. "Over the years he has spent countless hours not only coaching baseball and softball teams at both the Knight Bergman Center and Tower Park, but dragging diamonds, mowing, picking up rocks and in general, making sure the diamonds are in good use."

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Samuel Jones Cont. from Pg. 1

planters to the local greenhouse to be filled and returned next spring and making sure they are adopted and cared for by businesses during the summer season.

"And then, those same planters are filled with Christmas trees for the holiday season, not by magic, but by Jeff's hands," Brown said. "The list could go on and on. His support for the Warren Area Chamber of Commerce is also evident, as he has served as president and member of the board of directors, and continues to organize fundraising efforts, including those for construction of the Chamber Park being installed on 1st Street."

As a veteran, Brown offered a personal note of his appreciation of Souder opening his business to provide food for veterans on Veterans Day.

"Jeff epitomizes what it

means to give back to this community and we have provided only a snapshot of his support," he concluded. "We know many, many people of the Warren area have been impacted by the volunteer hours he has given. He will tell you he is only one of the many people who over the years have helped this community thrive, which is true; but he deserves recognition as this year's Samuel Jones Pioneer Award Winner."

Indeed, Souder extended the recognition to his wife, Becky, for her support and hard work.

"I couldn't do what I do without Becky beside me to take care of all the little things and keep me on the straight and narrow," he added.

Among the ceremonies held at this breakfast the town's annual 2018 Community Service Award was presented to the members

of the Warren Area Ministerial Association (WAMA).

David Daugherty presented the award, saying the group, which has been active in southern Huntington County for many years, takes its purpose from the book of Ephesians: "to walk in a manner worthy of your calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

"That is just what the members of this year's Community Service Award do," Daugherty added.

Among the services it provides, WAMA members provide a community vacation Bible school, a combined worship service during the Salamonie Summer Festival and community services for

Thanksgiving, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The group also provides leadership for The WAY (Warren Area Youth), allowing kids in grades 6 to 12 an opportunity to meet for fun, food, fellowship and spiritual enrichment. WAMA members are also involved in the Bread of Life Food Pantry.

Members meet once per month for fellowship, support and to take care of business. Some area churches whose pastors are unable to be active members still provide donations to the group's work.

Clergymen who were present to accept the award included Gerald Moreland, of Heritage Pointe; Allen Laws, of Warren Wesleyan Church; Scott Nedberg, of Warren United Church of Christ; and Rusty Strickler and Peter Fairchild, both of Warren First Baptist Church.