

Business gala shines spotlight on the city's bright lights

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GUELPH — A fledgling local life science company that sees a bright future helping people fight cancer was among those recognized for innovation Thursday at the annual Guelph Awards of Excellence.

PlantForm Corporation, is a spinoff firm from the University of Guelph, commercializing the work of environmental biology professor Chris Hall. It received the Guelph Partnership for Innovation Innovator Of The Year Award.

"It's just some wonderful recognition locally that we are doing interesting and novel work," PlantForm board chair Mark Goldberg said in an interview.

Interesting and novel, but unusual, too. The plant-based antibody drugs PlantForm makes to fight cancer are derived from, of all things, tobacco plants, "which has a nice irony to it," said Goldberg, a toxicologist and biotech entrepreneur.

While that may seem strange, Goldberg said Hall, the company's chief scientific officer, is an expert on the plant and its genetics are well understood. Further, tobacco plants grow rapidly to a good size.

"That makes our generic drugs very cheap," Goldberg said, acknowledging a strong link to the local campus.

GPI executive director Jim Wadleigh told an audience filling a main conference hall that Guelph has more than 100 life sciences and agri-food firms, as well as research institutions, industry associations and the university, forming part of a "global wave in biology." He added PlantForm stands among these with its innovative approach.

"The market is eager for lower-cost drugs," Wadleigh said.

The Guelph Chamber of Commerce and City Hall organized Thursday's 11th annual awards gala, held at the Delta Guelph Hotel and Conference Centre. In addition to the GPI award, there are also awards recognizing individual and group contributions presented by Mayor Karen Farbridge, the chamber, the Downtown Guelph Business Association, Guelph & Wellington Branch of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and the local United Way.

Mayor Karen Farbridge suggested Guelph has much to be thankful for as a thriving community.

"We live in the most caring community in Canada," the mayor said, adding much of that is due to philanthropy and volunteerism.

"I want to take this moment to say 'thank you.'"

The city's vision of "making a difference" is exemplified by all the award recipients, Farbridge added.

Goldberg returned the compliment, telling the audience the mayor deserves credit for fostering a growing knowledge-based economy full of emerging firms.

The scientists at PlantForm, he said, are representative of that considerable potential.

"Without these bright lights, we wouldn't be where we are today," Goldberg said.

Awards of Excellence

The following is a list of recipients at the Guelph Awards of Excellence 2010:

- Downtown Volunteer of the Year Award — greeters and receptionists at the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington
- The Mayor's Awards — Larry Hill, Christina Pilgrim, Imelda Gazzola Porcellato and Judy Coulman
- United Way Guelph & Wellington Campaign of the Year Awards — Cargill Meat Solutions and One Stone Road Provincial Employees, while President's Campaign Award went to The Co-operators

GPI Innovator of the Year Award: PlantForm Corporation

Architectural Conservancy of Ontario Guelph and Wellington Branch Heritage Awards — Ben Polley and Charles Nixon

There were also four Guelph Chamber of Commerce President's Business Recognition Awards. They are:

Customer Service Award — Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning

Environmental Stewardship Award — Homewood Health Centre

Community Building Award — Balnar Management Ltd.

Business Innovation Award — Bioenterprise Centre.



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