

Lewiston woman receives DEC's top award

By Galen P. Murray
Special to the Echo

Emily Latko of Lewiston began working in the Department of Environmental Conservation's Love Canal Public Information Office in May 1983, an extremely volatile time for the history-making waste site.

A decade later, Latko has been named recipient of the DEC's highest employee award, a reflection of her role as liaison between the DEC and a public hungry for answers.

DEC Commissioner Thomas C. Jorling recently presented Latko with the Ernest F. Trad Award, stating that through her dedication, compassion and relentless attention to detail, "Emily Latko personifies the best qualities of the dedicated public servants that are this department."

Latko, who transformed the home of a displaced resident into the Public Information Office, said the office was established primarily to give residents still living in Love Canal information about the remediation taking place.

"People from Albany would come in every month or so to an-



W. Haley/State Dept. of Environmental Conservation

WELL DONE: State DEC Commissioner Thomas C. Jorling, left, recently presented Emily Latko with the Ernest F. Trad Award, stating that through her dedication, compassion and relentless attention to detail, "Emily Latko personifies the best qualities of the dedicated public servants that are this department."

swer questions," Latko said. But because of the volume of questions, "The state decided to open the information office."

Because of the magnitude of Love Canal, Latko said technicians,

journalists, scientists and teachers from all over the world came or called for answers about what was

being done. "Because Love Canal was the first, they wanted to know what they could do about contamination in their own areas," she said.

Latko, who recently announced her retirement from state service, said she was elated by the award. "I'm quite surprised and quite pleased," she said. "A lot of other people had a hand in helping out."

Anita Gabalski, now with the state Department of Health in Albany, worked with Latko for six years. "She is a remarkable individual," Gabalski said. "She was dedicated to providing accurate information about what happened at Love Canal."

Latko said she believes the early 1980s proved the most difficult period for her at Love Canal.

"In 1983 people were hostile and angry but as we were able to give them more information, the hostility subsided," she said. There were even instances of vandalism at the office, but nothing fazed her — not even the possible health risk posed during remediation. "The office

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was tested," Latko said, "and the only thing they came up with was my white-out."

Latko's award also recognized her highly efficient filing system for the thousands of test results and reports created throughout the investigation and remediation of the canal.

With remediation work nearly complete, the DEC closed the Love Canal office in March 1993.