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## FEDERAL DIARY

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### 'Sammies' Honor Civil Service Standouts

**B**ad news seems to come in waves — literally, as in those that washed away homes near Galveston on Saturday. Hurricane Ike now is leaving his calling card across the rest of the country in the form of soaring gasoline prices. And the crisis on Wall Street is frightening.

But there is one place we can find some consistency and maybe even some comfort. That place is the often maligned federal civil service.

No joke.

Certainly, there are many times when dealing with the federal bureaucracy is excruciating — let's hope the reaction to Hurricane Ike is much better than the response to Hurricane Katrina.

But in the day-to-day provision of service to citizens, there are many civil servants who provide outstanding service. Most of them get little or no recognition. For a few of them, that changes tonight at the "Sammies," the Partnership for Public Service gala that recognizes "public servants whose remarkable work is making the world safer, healthier and greener."

Sammies stands for Service to America Medals. They are given to federal workers in several areas — global health, renewable energy, patient care, foreign affairs, law enforcement, homeland security and combating climate change.

Eight winners (two in patient care) will be honored tonight from among 29 finalists. All of them are worthy of notice in this column, but I don't have that much space. So I've chosen two finalists — Bobbi Bernstein and Renate Reimschuessel — from the Washington area. Others work in Seattle; El Paso; San Antonio; Pittsburgh; San Francisco; Boulder, Colo.; and in smaller places around the country. One finalist is based overseas in Jerusalem.

In many ways Bernstein, 40, and Reimschuessel, 55, are very different people. They were born in totally different environments — Bernstein in Dallas and Reimschuessel in East Germany. Bernstein plays soccer, Reimschuessel plays the violin. Reimschuessel works with animals who do no harm, Bernstein prosecutes people who give animals a bad name.

Bernstein is a Justice Department prosecutor, deputy chief of the civil rights division's criminal section to be exact. Along with Alex Bustamante, an assistant U.S.



**Renate Reimschuessel, a Food and Drug Administration research biologist, was a "Sammies" finalist for her work discovering the culprit in pet deaths.**



**Bobbi Bernstein is a Justice Department prosecutor.**

attorney in Los Angeles, Bernstein is a co-finalist for the Justice and Law Enforcement Medal.

They used novel legal theories to convict Latino gang members in Los Angeles who killed two black men and caused others to flee their neighborhood in fear. "To combat this campaign of racial violence, Bernstein and Bustamante developed an innovative and

aggressive prosecution strategy that led to the first use of federal hate crime and civil rights conspiracy statutes to target racially motivated violence committed by members of a traditional street gang," Max Stier, president of the Partnership, said in a statement.

Members of the gang, the Avenues, considered the Highland Park section of Los Angeles their turf, Bernstein said during an interview in her downtown D.C. office. African Americans were not welcome. The gang harassed black people with a variety of methods

that would make Tony Soprano blush. The Avenues didn't care if you were a rival gang member or just a resident. If you were a black person living on their turf you were a target.

"They talked about this being a brown neighborhood," Bernstein said. "We have to keep it brown."

Developing the legal theory was one thing, getting frightened victims to testify was another. "We felt it in our bones," how terrified the witnesses were of the Avenues, she recalled.

But they, including FBI agents and Los Angeles police officers, were successful. Four gang members were convicted in August 2006 of waging a six-year campaign against black people. "The good news is none of them [the witnesses] were hurt," Bernstein said. Some, however, did move out of the neighborhood. "These people were scared of dying."

One characteristic Bernstein and Reimschuessel share is great energy. It's evident as Reimschuessel, a Food and Drug Administration research biologist, talks about her work and walks from her office on the rural FDA campus in Laurel to the aquaculture lab, a barn where fish swim in huge tanks.

She used those fish, or at least some like them, to discover why so many dogs and cats were getting sick beginning in late 2006. The FDA issued the largest recall of pet food in history, but that didn't solve the mystery.

Other scientists knew the pets died from renal failure and some suspected melamine, a chemical found in the recalled food, according to Stier. But many investigators thought it wasn't toxic and moved on to other possible causes.

Reimschuessel, a finalist for the Homeland Security Medal, wasn't convinced. She used the fish to find out what happened to the dead pets. "Her team fed some fish with a dose of melamine, others with cyanuric acid and others with a combination of the two," Stier explained.

She was able to demonstrate that the combination of the chemicals made pets sick. "These discoveries helped resolve an immediate crisis," Stier said, "and her continued efforts help guard against ongoing threats to the safety of the U.S. food supply."

This is a better, safer country because of Reimschuessel and Bernstein.

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