

Gene Haynes, principal at Omaha North High School, and the late Luigi Waites received the fourth annual African-American Congressional History Awards at a ceremony Wednesday.

Rep. Lee Terry handed out the awards during the Hungry Man Club luncheon at Big Mama's Kitchen, citing the two men's contributions to Omaha, their efforts to strengthen the community and their professional achievements.

Terry, who also will honor Haynes and Waites on the U.S. House floor next week, said: "Both of these men -- and their accomplishments -- truly represent what is best in the Omaha community. Their efforts demonstrate how an individual can make a difference and should serve as an inspiration to us all."

Haynes is known for his hands-on approach to being a motivational educator.

He is active in north Omaha's Project Impact, the Urban League of Nebraska, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Pacesetter Scholarship Committee.

"When I saw the list of previous winners of this award, I felt privileged to be included," Haynes said after the ceremony. "I can't put it into words how grateful I am."

Haynes said his goal as an educator is "to close the achievement gap and build a working relationship with the kids."

Haynes was well-acquainted with Waites, the percussionist who died in April 2010 at age 82.

Waites was widely known -- internationally as well as locally -- as a jazz musician. He had played with such greats as Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie. He was the Nebraska Arts Council's artist of the year in 1996 and was inducted into the Omaha Black Music Hall of Fame in 2005.

Haynes praised Waites for his talent, adding: "He wasn't only a performer. He was a teacher."



