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September 10, 2009: Founder of Lawrence History Center to receive Outstanding American by Choice Initiative Recognition

Eartha Dengler, founder of Immigrant City Archives/Lawrence History Center, antiwar and civil rights activist, and champion of the immigrants of her adopted city of Lawrence, Massachusetts will receive one of the nation's most prestigious awards, the Outstanding American by Choice Initiative. This recognition given by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, will be presented on Tuesday, September 15 at 1:00 p.m. in the historic courtyard of the Essex Company, 6 Essex Street, which houses the archives. The initiative recognizes the significant contributions and achievements of naturalized U.S. citizens who have made a personal decision to become an American by choice. Past recipients include Carlos M. Gutierrez, former U.S. Secretary of Commerce; Elie Wiesel, author and Nobel Peace Prize winner; Franklin Chang Diaz, former NASA astronaut; and General John Shalikashvili, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Dengler, who will be honored along with Eva A. Millona, Executive Director of MIRA, is being honored "having demonstrated responsible citizenship and commitment to this country and the common civic values that unite us all as Americans" The Recognition Ceremony follows the dedication, earlier the same day, of the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services Lawrence Field Office, at 2 Mill Street. After the dedication, the program moves to 6 Essex Street and will also include the naturalization of 15 immigrants who will become citizens that day and the recognition ceremony.

Dengler was born near Hamburg, Germany, in 1922. She emigrated to the United States in 1951 with her husband, Claus, and their daughter Ann, and resided in Andover for decades. As a young woman she lived through the terrifying years of World War II, fleeing as a refugee from bombings and then resisting the Russian occupation. Settling in the greater Lawrence area--home to wave after wave of immigrants who had come first from Europe, then from the middle east, to work in the city's mills--Dengler drew upon her own experience to reach out, discover, and preserve the larger story of Lawrence's immigrants and the role they played in building what is still called "the Immigrant City." Dengler, now 88 years old, lives in St. Louis Park, Minn., near her family.

A humanitarian, passionate about history and the plight of immigrants, she founded the Immigrant City Archives, a repository of some 750 oral histories, photographs, city records, documents and the Essex Company compound & collection, now called the Lawrence History Center. She began the archives from a closet in the YWCA, working from scratch with documents of women immigrants who were residents of the YWCA in the city. "When the records became obsolete--for the Y--they became important to me, and I convinced them to turn them over to me; I wanted to keep them," she said.

"The immigrant story is never obsolete; it is the texture of America. Eartha lived it, understood it, and spent the latter part of her life preserving it," said Barbara B. Brown, Executive Director of the Lawrence History Center. "The issues she raised in Lawrence--about citizen participation, community building and most importantly, respect for everyone's history--are the very issues that surface at the national level as the country deals with immigrant issues today," she added.

Dengler received a B.A., Magna Cum Laude from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in 1975, and a master's degree from the Graduate School of Library Science, Simmons College, Boston, in 1977. Besides caring for her family, which had grown to three children, she worked at Andover's Memorial Hall Library while attending college, to make ends meet. Among her many awards and recognitions include a Doctor of Humanities, from Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass; Lawrence Eagle Tribune, Woman of the Year, Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce Leadership Award, and the Bay State Historical League, John I. Ayer Award.

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