



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
Office of Marketing and Communications
Press Release
May 6, 2019

Contact: Angela Daidone
201-684-7477
news@ramapo.edu

Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Celebrates Honorees at 23rd Annual Ceremony at Ramapo College

MAHWAH, N.J. — Unsung heroes from throughout New Jersey earned recognition for their compassion and concern for others as part of the 23rd Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award ceremony at Ramapo College on May 3.

The top honoree received a cash prize of \$50,000; two second place honorees received \$25,000 each. Seven awards with a \$7,500 cash prize each were also announced. Established in 1997 by the late Russell Berrie, and managed and hosted by Ramapo College of New Jersey, the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award honors Garden State residents whose outstanding community service and charitable contributions made a substantial impact on the lives of others.

About the 2019 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Honorees

FRAIDY REISS of WESTFIELD (Union County) was 19 when her family arranged her marriage to a violent man. With no education or job, and in a religious community where only men can grant a divorce, she was trapped for 12 years. Fraidy became the first in her family to attend college; she graduated from Rutgers at age 32 as valedictorian. She went on to become an investigative reporter at the Asbury Park Press, got divorced and won custody of her two daughters. In 2011, Fraidy founded unchained At Last to help other women in New Jersey and across the United States to resist or escape forced marriages and rebuild their lives. Through Unchained, she has provided crucial, often life-saving services – always free of charge – to more than 500 women. When girls under the age of 18 started reaching out for the same help, Unchained could not help them because marriage before 18 was legal in all 50 states. Fraidy’s research as a reporter revealed an estimated 248,000 children, some as young as age 12, were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2010, mostly young girls to adult men. In New Jersey, she discovered that more than 3,600 children as young as 13 were married between 1995 and 2015, with more than 85 percent young girls to adult men. Fraidy drafted a bill to end child marriages in New

Jersey and worked for months to convince two legislators, Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz and Senator Nellie Pou, to introduce it. Her efforts paid off on June 22, 2018 when Governor Murphy signed the bill and made New Jersey the second state, after Delaware, to end child marriage. For her extraordinary efforts, **Fraidy has been awarded the \$50,000 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award.**

KAREN MONROY of **FLEMINGTON** (Hunterdon County) **is the recipient of the \$25,000 award.** As her son Zachary prepared to graduate in 2013 from the Midland School, a special education school in Branchburg, Karen was unsure about her son's future. She understood that life after age 21 is challenging for a differently-abled person. Karen began researching possibilities and became disheartened at the so few programs available. She worked with her son to create a vision board, filled with the things he hoped to accomplish. The topic of food was recurring so she thought, what if she designed a food business to serve as a place where talented people could work and employ developmentally disabled individuals at the same time? Her vision became Ability2Work, a non-profit that operates Grateful Bites bakery and café, a convergence of chefs who are looking to change the world of food, parents who want an opportunity for their differently-abled children, and a community that supports the cause. The team is trained by the world-renowned Culinary Institute of America. The staff of 54 includes 18 apprentices, who are shadowed by paraprofessionals to help them learn life skills and enjoy themselves. More than 400 differently-abled young people have jobs, ranging from harvesting vegetables and picking up eggs from the farm to cooking and baking in the two kitchens and even working in the cafe with the patrons. After the first year, the Star-Ledger named them a Top 20 Bakery in New Jersey.

MELINA GARCIA of **UNION CITY** (Hudson County) was shocked to learn that 21 percent of the population of Union City, mostly immigrants, lived below the poverty line. With a vision to have orchestral music become a vehicle for social change, Melina partnered with the Union City Board of Education to launch in 2012 the Union City Music Project, an after-school program with 50 city pre-school children. Teaching beginners with paper maché violins in the "Paper orchestra" program, UCMP's bilingual, classically trained teaching artists instruct older children to play real strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion instruments. Each year, more than 100 three-to-18 year olds from Union City, North Bergen, Jersey City, Weehawken and West New York participate. Melina has been at the helm of this grassroots non-profit, without pay, since its inception, selflessly focusing on accomplishing her vision: inspiring academic excellence, enhancing life skills and building community through music education. For her tireless advocacy, **Melina is the winner of the \$25,000 award.**

Cash awards of \$7,500 were presented to:

In 2011, **BRIDGET CUTLER** of **NORTH PLAINFIELD** (Somerset County) started an organization called Moms Helping Moms to help low-income and struggling moms with basic baby items.

Most daycare centers require that parents bring in enough diapers for their children. If they don't, they are not allowed to leave their children at daycare, which often prevents them from working or going to school. Most children need as many as 12 diapers per day -- which can cost up to \$125 a month and is an item that is not covered by WIC or food stamps. Through partnerships with community organizations, social workers, homeless shelters, schools and others, Bridget and her team collect and distribute an estimated 300,000 diapers each year to more than 12,000 families, along with clothing, formula, nursing supplies, strollers and countless other baby essentials. She also started new initiatives to help families, such as a dental program to distribute toothbrushes and toothpaste, and an early literacy program to encourage parents to read to their children.

As a high school student, **MICHAEL DOLISZNY of OCEAN CITY (Cape May County)** saw an opportunity to support sustainable environment in Cape May County to benefit communities, homeowners and tourists. For his Eagle Scout project, he created an iOS mobile app to locate electric car charging stations. Michael's project, which utilizes technology, required no purchases or building construction from the county. The mobile app was donated to the County and the local Chamber of Commerce for public service use. In the fall of 2018, Michael decided to go above and beyond the Eagle Scout project. Concerned about high unemployment in the Cape May area among veterans, he met with veteran leaders and learned that many older veterans were intimidated by the use of computers, often and struggling while searching online for jobs or accessing VA benefits. He initiated a collaboration with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Atlantic Cape Community College and the local volunteer veterans council to create a basic computer skills program, with a customized need-based curriculum designed to improve the unemployment and under-employment rates of older veterans throughout Cape May County. The program was designed to teach them how to easily access their VA benefits online and apply for jobs with local businesses. He secured an agreement with the community college to use its lab, and he helped recruit an instructor for the courses. He raised almost \$19,000 from citizens and small business to launch the program, which allows 375 veterans to take classes over a one-year period. Michael demonstrated a unique and uncommon ability to motivate and rally people from diverse demographics, professions and backgrounds to come together to support our veterans. He truly inspires others to both action and cooperation.

KATHERINE EVANS of NEWTON (Sussex County) has been working to protect and preserve New Jersey's public open spaces for more than 30 years, beginning in the 1990s when a developer sought to build a casino, golf course and hundreds of homes on Sparta Mountain. Katherine worked with various environmental groups, the Victoria Foundation, the N.J. Conservation Foundation and others to protect the contiguous parcels of forested canopy that is home to now more than 120 rare, threatened/ endangered and special concern species. Because of her work, this land was purchased for the people of New Jersey under Green Acres funding and is part of a larger contiguous forested canopy of our Highlands Region, which supplies the drinking water to more than 70 percent of the state. Many of the rare plant communities are thriving today on Sparta Mountain because we have allowed this region to

recover from previous human activities that occurred in the 1800s. Now, Katherine continues to defend and protect Sparta Mountain as new threats exist that undermine the ecosystem services that this area provides. She is active in meeting with policy makers, attending important legislative events and has been involved in the N.J. Highlands Coalition Natural Heritage Program. She continues to do all this work as a volunteer and does so selflessly with some weeks totaling in excess of 40 hours of unpaid work.

PATRICK FINN of **SEWELL** (Gloucester County) rescued and saved the life of a man and two children inside their burning home. He responded before emergency services came, as he woke up once he heard screaming coming from the building. Firefighters responded to the fire at Philips Court in Sewell where a blaze trapped a family inside. Before the police arrived, all three of the family members were out of the building, thanks to Patrick's brave actions. Using a ladder onto the second story floor, he was able to get man to slide outside the window to catch him and then his two children. Three lives were saved by Patrick's willingness to act.

When she was in the 5th grade, **ALEXA GRABELLE** of **VOORHEES** (Camden County) founded Bags of Books (BOB) after learning about reading gaps and summer slide that exist for students from impoverished backgrounds. BOB has donated more than 150,000 gently used books in multiple states valued at \$450,000, in the process saving tons of books from landfills. As president of BOB, she is responsible for its ongoing operation – a role she balances alongside her many academic and extracurricular commitments. Alexa donates a majority of the books to South Jersey/Philadelphia schools plagued by extremely high poverty levels and affected by major budget cuts, which leave libraries and other resources severely lacking. Thousands of students have now benefited directly from BOB, bringing home bags full of books they “shopped” for based on personal interests. Alexa's books have also restocked school libraries, even creating the first-ever special needs library at one school. The children's joy and excitement when selecting books, gratitude expressed by teachers, and parents' positive feedback has demonstrated the program's success. Alexa also dramatically scaled BOB, replicating the work in other cities -- covering 15 states and four countries.

In 1976, **SUZANN GOLDSTEIN** of **WARREN** (Somerset County) lost her 9-year-old daughter Valerie to bone cancer. She was determined to find a way to provide cancer care and supportive services to other children in New Jersey. In 1978, Suzann and her husband Ed founded The Valerie Fund, with its first location at Overlook Medical Center in Summit. Over the years, The Valerie Fund network has grown to seven outpatient pediatric oncology/hematology centers treating more than 6,000 children annually in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York, with more than a \$5 million budget. For 35 years, The Valerie Fund has operated Camp Happy Times, a one-week overnight camp experience for any child aged 5-21 who has or has had cancer, regardless of where they are treated. The camp is free of charge, including transportation, meals and on-site medical care. More than 150 children attend Camp Happy Times each summer. The Valerie Fund Scholarship Program was founded in 2006 to provide financial support to hundreds of children treated for cancer to put toward a

post-secondary education. For the 2018-19 academic year alone, \$400,000 in scholarships was provided. In 2001, Suzann lost her second daughter to breast cancer, and once again, she transformed her loss into a project to benefit others. In 2009, Suzann and Ed established the Stacy Goldstein Breast Center at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey. From her actions, the cancer journey has been made easier for fellow New Jerseyans by allowing them to receive the best possible medical care close to home.

THOMAS VON OEHSEN of **TRENTON** (Mercer County) started the Trenton Circus Squad to "inspire youth to take big leaps in life" and as a way of providing youth with alternatives to hanging out in the streets. The program offers workshops free of charge to children ages 6-11 from Trenton and surrounding communities, and teaches them circus skills, teamwork and leadership skills. He created Circus Squad for teens to learn advanced techniques, life skills and build trust with teens from other neighborhoods. Teens lead community engagement through workshops and performances with younger children and neighborhood families. Thomas has successfully secured donors to fund the program, which costs approximately \$600 per child to operate.

###

Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state's premier public liberal arts college. Ranked among the top colleges in the region by College Choice and recognized by, among others, U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review, Colleges of Distinction and also designated by Victory Media as a "Military Friendly College," Ramapo College is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Educational Technology, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education.