



Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Announces Honorees for 25th Annual Ceremony

24 selfless New Jerseyans will be celebrated for dedication to their communities in a trying year

MAHWAH, N.J. – This past year, as communities across New Jersey and the country faced an array of challenges caused by the pandemic, concern over racial injustice unrest and natural disasters, unsung heroes stepped up to help feed, comfort and educate their neighbors, and in other ways protect public health and safety.

On Friday, May 7 at a virtual awards ceremony starting at 11:30 a.m., the Russell Berrie Foundation will recognize a number of these unsung heroes from across the Garden State for their compassion and selfless dedication to others during the 25th anniversary celebration of the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award.

For 25 years, the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award has honored New Jersey residents whose outstanding service to others and heroic acts make a substantial impact on the lives of others. A top prize of \$50,000, four awards of \$25,000 and 14 awards of \$7,500 will be presented this year. The award has now given \$3.75 million to 380 people, each of whom has an inspiring story to tell about how they made a difference.

“As challenging as 2020 was for so many of us, these selfless individuals answered their communities’ call for help,” said Angelica Berrie, President, Russell Berrie Foundation. “From activists fighting injustice and systemic inequities to neighbors helping neighbors struggling during the pandemic, it’s an honor to celebrate this remarkable group of individuals as part of our 25th anniversary celebration of the awards and Russ’ legacy.”

Ramapo College of New Jersey manages the awards program and ceremony on behalf of the Russell Berrie Foundation. This year’s awardees are:

Dionisio Cucuta, Jr., aka “Chef Dion,” a military veteran from Teaneck and this year’s \$50,000 winner, is described as an irreplaceable asset to his community. Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic created devastating food insecurity for many vulnerable residents in Bergen County, Chef Dion jumped into action. Drawing on his culinary background, he created Hot Wheels, hot dinners prepared from scratch to families at Bergen Family Center. He has since created Table to Table Tuesday, a raw food distribution donated by Table to Table food rescue organization. Chef Dion has also been a long-time mentor to young people through the Disabled Combat Veterans Youth Program and Englewood’s Culinary Cadets program.

Kim Gaddy of Newark has spent more than 20 years on the frontlines fighting for environmental justice in New Jersey communities of color, starting in her own South Ward neighborhood where

she raised her three children who suffered from chronic asthma. That personal experience and losing her brother-in-law to a fatal asthma attack compelled her to be a voice for communities impacted by industrial pollution. After a decade of tenacious advocacy by Kim and other environmental leaders, New Jersey now has the strongest environmental justice legislation in the nation. In recognition of her steadfast leadership, she is the recipient of a \$25,000 award.

Anthony Capuano of Jersey City was in the right place at the right time. As a lifeguard and swim instructor, Anthony knew he couldn't stand on the sidelines as he saw a car sinking in the Newark Bay with the driver trapped inside. The cold November water or even his prosthetic leg didn't stop Anthony from jumping into the water to save the driver – who, unknown to Anthony, could not swim. His quick thinking, bravery and lifesaving action earned him a \$25,000 award.

Maria Torres of Newark became the manager of United Community Corporation's Champion House food pantry just weeks before the onset of COVID-19. Recently diagnosed with Lupus, she was at extremely high risk yet never wavered in her commitment to the community. As lockdowns and unemployment led to a huge rise in food insecurity, the pantry served 150,000 people in 2020—an increase of more than 1,000 % over prior years. Maria will receive a \$25,000 award for her dedicated service.

Sister Frances Salemi of Jersey City has improved lives for decades, and the students she has helped number in the thousands. On December 10, 2019, she and her staff saved the lives of their students as two attackers ambushed a grocery store across the street from Sacred Heart School, where she serves as principal. In the hours-long shootout with police that ensued, four people were killed, and the school was riddled with bullets. Sister Frances is the recipient of a \$25,000 award.

The following honorees will receive \$7,500 awards:

- **Donna York, Hillsborough**, is founder of HARK ALS, which provides financial and emotional support for families affected by ALS. York's daily acts of heroism exemplify commitment, courage, and leadership to the ALS community.
- **Paul Nickels, Hackensack**, is the creator of Homeless Resource Guide and an advocate for the homeless. Pulling from his own experiences, Paul provides a voice for those who have been silenced by their struggles.
- **Larry Abrams, Cherry Hill**, founder of BookSmiles, is a champion of literacy working to combat "book deserts" in South Jersey to ensure that underserved children have their personal library at home to help develop good literacy skills.
- **Sheryl Olitzky, North Brunswick**, is founding director of Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, whose mission is to build trust, respect, and relationships between Muslim and Jewish women and teenage girls, with 175+ chapters in the US, Canada, and select European cities.
- **Rosa Zaremba, South Plainfield**, founder of Mexican Alliance of New Jersey, helps young people in Latinx communities explore college and career options by connecting them with mentors and learning opportunities.
- **Phil Stafford, Wallington**, is founder of N.J. Food and Clothing Rescue. Grit and heart have fueled Phil's volunteer efforts before and during COVID-19 to secure and redistribute food to vulnerable individuals at risk of falling through the cracks.

- **Paul Winslow, East Hanover**, founder of Students 2 Science, brings together the public and private sectors to change the life trajectory of students from underserved communities through STEM education with real-world applications and real-world solutions.
- Affectionally known as “**The Rescuers**” (**Kieran Foley, Joseph Dietrich, Drew Scalice, Ryan Day, and Tyler Armagan**), **Middletown**, these teens created a human chain to save two small children whose sled entered an icy pond on a cold December day.
- **Emma & Quinn Joy, South Orange**, founders of Girls Helping Girls. Period., address one of the most overlooked and underdiscussed issues facing low-income women today – period poverty. Emma and Quinn embody the spirit of making a difference while advocating and educating others to erase the stigma surrounding menstrual health.
- **Amanda Ebokosia, Newark**, is founder of The Gem Project, which educates young people about critical issues affecting their communities. Through activism and service-learning, youth strengthen skills of leadership and community organizing.
- **Wilhelmina Holder, Newark**, is President of Newark Secondary Parents Council. Decades after having children in the public education system, she continues to advocate for equity and opportunity for young people in Newark Public Schools.
- **Sharron Miller, Montclair**, is founder of Sharron Miller’s Academy for the Performing Arts. For over 25 years, Sharon has expanded arts education access for thousands of underserved N.J. young people – primarily children of color.
- **Jerzy “Jerry” Maziarz, Elizabeth**, his exceptional volunteerism and compassion for those in need makes Jerry an asset to the community. As a volunteer with St. Joseph Social Service Center for over 19 years, Jerry chooses to make a difference every day.
- **Lynn Regan, Farmingdale**, founded CFC Loud N Clear Foundation after witnessing her loved one’s agonizing struggle with addiction. She created a successful relapse prevention model that has helped thousands of young people achieve long-term sober living.

To learn more about each of the 2021 honorees and to register for the virtual celebration, visit www.ramapo.edu/berrie-awards/.

About the Russell Berrie Foundation

The Russell Berrie Foundation was established in 1985 by Russell Berrie, an entrepreneur and philanthropist. He had a passion for giving that was grounded in his deep belief in humanity, the importance of touching the lives of ordinary people, the importance of strengthening the local community in New Jersey, and the power of using philanthropy to help achieve transformational change. The Russell Berrie Foundation seeks to continue Russ’ mission by providing significant support to strengthen New Jersey’s arts, cultural, and health care institutions, and celebrates everyday people who make a significant difference in the lives of others through the **Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award**.

About Ramapo College of New Jersey

Ramapo College of New Jersey, established in 1969, is the state’s premier public liberal arts college and is committed to academic excellence through learning and international and intercultural understanding. The College is ranked #1 among New Jersey public institutions by College Choice and is recognized as a top college by U.S. News & World Report, Kiplinger’s, Princeton Review, and Money magazine, among others. The campus center for performing and visual arts is named in honor of Angelica and Russ Berrie.