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RUSS BERRIE MAKING A DIFFERENCE AWARD ANNOUNCES HONOREES FOR THE 27TH ANNUAL CEREMONY

11 NEW JERSEY COMMUNITY CHANGEMAKERS RECOGNIZED FOR EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE TO OTHERS

Mahwah, NJ – Each person knows an individual who gives back to the community by creating positive change. The Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award has been recognizing those changemakers for 27 years --- unsung heroes from around New Jersey who demonstrate their passion and unstoppable commitment to serve the most vulnerable.

Established by the late Russell Berrie, funded by the Russell Berrie Foundation, and hosted and managed by Ramapo College of New Jersey, the awards honor New Jersey residents whose outstanding community service and heroic acts have made a substantial impact on the lives of others.

Eleven outstanding changemakers will be honored at the 27th Anniversary Award Ceremony on Friday, May 5, 2023, 11:30am at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

With 419 honorees since the inception of the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award in 1997, more than \$4 million in cash awards have been presented to recognize the personal sacrifices and commitments these individuals have made to serve others. Their work is improving people's lives and making communities stronger. The nominees include community leaders, affinity groups, ethnic and religious organizations, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, among many others in such areas as community service, volunteerism, social justice, community life, environmental issues, and a range of advocacy topics.

"I could not be more inspired by this year's Making a Difference Award honorees for their efforts ranging from preventing violence to distributing tons of food and supplies weekly to people in need," said Scott Berrie, vice president of the Russell Berrie Foundation and son of Russ Berrie. "They have incredible dedication to tackling problems, bringing needed solutions that improve people's lives and strengthen communities throughout New Jersey. It's an honor to advance and celebrate their efforts."

This year, awards totaling \$160,000 will be presented to 11 honorees.

The 2023 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award honorees are:

Tia Ryans of Newark founded F.O.R.T.E. House NJ (Forcing Out Recidivism Through Education).

Tia was incarcerated for a decade following a traumatic childhood. Determined to change her life, she began taking classes and enrolled in Rutgers following release, graduating in 2019. While at Rutgers, she recognized a need for tools and support for justice impacted students transitioning through postsecondary education and founded F.O.R.T.E. House in Newark. Tia has become a leading advocate

for criminal reform and restorative justice in New Jersey. In 2022, she was appointed by Gov. Phil Murphy as a Trustee of the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, the first formerly incarcerated person in that position. Tia will receive the top award of \$50,000.

Melissa Walker of Montclair created JAZZ HOUSE KIDS. A professional jazz vocalist, Melissa created JAZZ HOUSE KIDS in 2002 to use jazz, America's original musical art form, to ignite creativity and enhance students' academy and social-emotional skills. Afterschool and summer programs provide a supportive creative community for students from diverse backgrounds from 10 New Jersey counties. In school programs reach those in under-resourced schools in Newark and Paterson. Melissa will receive a \$25,000 award.

Pamela Johnson of Jersey City founded the Anti-Violence Coalition of Hudson County. After surviving a shooting more 20 years ago, Pamela Johnson was compelled to take action to help other victims of violence. In 2014, she launched a grassroots anti-violence movement in Jersey City, which led the creation of the Anti-Violence Coalition of Hudson County that provides trauma counseling and support for victims and families while also working on violence prevention and de-escalation in communities. Pamela will receive a \$25,000 award.

Awards of \$7,500 will be presented to:

Christian Kane of Toms River spearheaded RWJ Barnabas Health Field of Dreams. A car accident left Christian's son, Gavin, with traumatic brain injuries and unable to walk or speak. After struggling to access recreational spaces with his son, Christian decided to build a comprehensive recreational facility where children of all abilities and their caretakers would feel at home. Christian spearheaded a multi-year campaign to raise funds and build the RWJ Barnabas Health Field of Dreams in Toms River which opened in 2022.

Rylee Howerton of Vineland launched the "Choose Wise Words" campaign. Diagnosed on the autism spectrum as a child, Rylee overheard other children describe her using an offensive word. That experience resulted in her launching the "Choose Wise Words" campaign which led to a book and speaking opportunities to thousands of people about kindness and inclusivity. Now a high school student, she uses sports and pageants as a platform to share her message.

Claudia Wheeler of East Brunswick launched SALT Foundation. A U.S. Navy veteran and elementary school teacher, Claudia launched the SALT Foundation to provide food and supplies to those in need. This volunteer effort rescues four tons of food weekly and distributes to food pantries, shelters, organizations and churches.

Carol Dvoor of Flemington created the Safe Harbor Child Access Center. A domestic violence survivor, Carol created the Safe Harbor Child Access Center, a trauma informed, inclusive, child-friendly and supportive space to host supervised visitations and social engagement opportunities for families experiencing separate and divorce in Hunterdon, Warren and Somerset Counties.

Zaniya Lewis of Edgewater Park started YesSheCanCampaign. Zaniya started YesSheCanCampaign to equip young people who are overcoming adversity with the tools and resources to succeed in college and in their careers. Her advocacy to end scholarship displacement led to legislation that prohibits the practice at New Jersey's public colleges and university.

Jose German-Gomez of Montclair launched Northeast Earth Coalition. After retiring from his accounting and finance career, Jose turned his energies to educating and supporting local environmental and sustainability initiatives. He launched the Northeast Earth Coalition to encourage local sustainability in North Jersey communities, holding workshops and training more than 750 volunteers who manage projects and community gardens in 11 communities around North Jersey.

Robt Martin Seda-Schreiber of Princeton founded the Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice.

Robt was a middle school teacher for 25 years and has been at the forefront of social justice advocacy for decades. He founded the Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice in Princeton which offers innovative support programs and a dedicated safe space for young LGBTQIA+ people that is staffed with trained volunteers.

Norma Bowe of Highland Park started Be the Change NJ. Over 13 years ago, Norma started Be the Change, a volunteer community service and activist group, to address social justice issues in New Jersey. She's led teams of volunteers to deliver food and support to homeless individuals in Newark every week for 12 years. During the pandemic, she created an Emergency Pandemic Food Pantry that delivered over 46,000 food boxes to vulnerable people in seven counties. She established a Mobile Vaccine Clinic to reach marginalized, vaccine-hesitant communities, and began an outreach to elderly individuals living in homeless tent encampments in Ocean County.

To learn more about each of the 2023 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Honorees, visit <https://russberriemakingadifferenceaward.org/>.

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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 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.###