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## **2024 RUSS BERRIE MAKING A DIFFERENCE AWARD HONOREES STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES ACROSS NEW JERSEY**

### **28<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CEREMONY RECOGNIZES 12 CHANGEMAKERS FOR EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE TO OTHERS**

Mahwah, NJ – The Russ Berrie Making a Difference Awards have been recognizing community changemakers for 28 years—unsung heroes from all parts of New Jersey who demonstrate their commitment to serve the most vulnerable through outstanding community service and acts of heroism.

Twelve outstanding changemakers will be honored at the 28th Anniversary Award Ceremony on Friday, May 10, 2024, at 11:30 a.m. at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

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 visionary leadership has made a substantial impact on the lives of others.

Since the inception of the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award in 1997, more than \$4.2 million in cash awards have been presented to a total of 430 honorees to highlight the personal sacrifices and commitments these individuals have made to improve people’s lives and make communities stronger. The nominees include community leaders, advocates, nonprofit founders and volunteers, among many others who dedicate themselves to community service, social justice, environmental issues, and a range of powerful causes.

“The Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award reflects the very best of New Jersey and celebrates the power of individuals to make a difference in the lives of others,” said Scott Berrie, vice president of The Russell Berrie Foundation Board of Trustees. “This year’s nominees are helping members of their communities escape homelessness, access life-saving health services, and pursue healthy childhood development and academic success. Their impact is astounding and I could not be more inspired by their vision and dedication.”

This year, awards totaling \$167,500 will be presented to 12 honorees.

The 2024 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award honorees are:

**Phyllis DiNardi of Ocean** was inspired to start [We Are Loved](#) after years of advocating for and fostering 49 children in the foster care system. She saw how foster children desperately needed empathy, support, and empowerment in a safe, loving community, while learning essential life skills. We Are Loved provides resources, training, and support to encourage healthy and happy development of foster care families in New Jersey. Phyllis’s tireless efforts have brought hope to a community that is under-resourced and often overlooked. She is being honored with the \$50,000 Making a Difference Award.

**Kristy Whilden of Elmer** was a music educator for 10 years when she learned that she was losing her hearing due to progressive sensorineural hearing loss. She feared her hearing loss would end her ability to enjoy the performing arts. Kristy spiraled into a depression that landed her and her children in a shelter for a time. Determined to move forward, she went back to school and obtained a degree in Deaf Studies/American Sign Language (ASL). Kristy and her daughter Hailey, who learned ASL to communicate

with her mother, co-founded [HandsUp Silent Theater](#) in Millville that has produced unique and impactful performances and events for the d/Deaf, Hard Of Hearing, and hearing communities to enjoy as one. Kristy will receive a \$25,000 award.

**Nadine Wright-Arhubakr of East Orange** understands the challenges faced by parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, particularly in under-resourced communities. When her son Nassan was diagnosed, Nadine struggled to find services and support in the East Orange/Newark area. She created [Nassan's Place](#) to fill that gap and provide accessible and affordable educational and recreational programs for children and families affected by autism in and around inner-city communities in New Jersey. In the past 12 years, Nadine has touched the lives of thousands and is a sought-after speaker, advocate, and coach for families affected by autism. She will receive a \$25,000 award.

Awards of \$7,500 will be given to the following individuals:

**Riccardo Dale of Beverly** is the founder of [Free All Minds Academy](#). As a teen, his life spiraled out of control, but with exceptional support from a mentor in his community, he blazed a path to success. Determined to pay it forward, Riccardo started Free All Minds Academy, a mentorship organization committed to shaping the leaders of tomorrow by providing support in academic achievement, personal development, and career exploration. An astounding 100% of Free All Minds students graduate from high school and nearly all attend post-secondary institutions, receiving more than \$1.4 million in scholarships.

**Shirley Green** founded the [Whitesboro Historical Foundation Museum](#) in Cape May County in 2000 and has served as its curator for more than 20 years. The Foundation preserves the unique history of Whitesboro, the first planned African American community in New Jersey. Founded by George H. White, the last Reconstruction-era African American Congressman, Whitesboro was a vibrant community settled by African Americans fleeing racial violence in the South in the early twentieth century.

**Ron Hine of Hoboken** was a founding member of the [Fund for a Better Waterfront](#) and currently serves as its executive director. Since 1990, he has been a leading advocate to preserve public access to Hoboken's waterfront and has led the planning of the contiguous public park along the Hudson River that is largely completed. Ron's committed leadership has raised Hoboken's profile as a beacon of smart urban design and inspiration for waterfront renewal worldwide.

**Trinity Jagdeo of Vineland** is a champion for inclusion. Inspired by her lifelong friendship with Alexis Dick, who has spinal muscular atrophy, Trinity founded [From We Can't to We Can](#) when she was just 17 years old. As an author and advocate, she is committed to increasing representation by creating a book series featuring real children with disabilities as superheroes and curating fashion shows and other events that normalize and celebrate differences.

**Mark Leschinsky of Mahwah** is an award-winning 18-year-old filmmaker and [founder & director of the Student World Impact Film Festival \(SWIFF\)](#), which celebrates the power of film to create positive change by showcasing student voices from around the world. By waiving all submission fees, SWIFF has empowered a global community of young storytellers, learners, and changemakers who are united in their shared commitment to amplifying diverse voices and igniting positive change through the art of filmmaking.

**Ruth Perez of Camden** is committed to the empowerment of Latinx business owners and residents in South Jersey. She spearheaded the creation of the first-ever corner store coalition in Camden and managed the "Healthy Corner Store Initiative," which combines training, equipment, and support for store owners and incentives for shoppers to purchase healthy foods and beverages right in their neighborhoods. Ruth's experiences as a formerly undocumented resident motivated her to co-found

[Movimento Tricolor](#), a nonprofit that facilitates social, cultural, and economic resources for the Dominican diaspora and other immigrant communities in South Jersey.

**Kim Sleeman of Short Hills** launched [The Warehouse](#) in 2019 with a mission to help individuals and families who have experienced homelessness transition into their new homes by providing them with gently used furniture and household items. The Warehouse has become a valuable resource for 40+ organizations in New Jersey, ranging from domestic violence shelters to refugee resettlement agencies. By providing the necessities that turn a space into a home, Kim has given more than 2,100 people a sense of beauty, dignity, and security in their lives.

**Ralph Stowe of Sayreville** founded [Jazz for Prostate Cancer Awareness](#)™ in 2011 to honor his brother, legendary NYC jazz trombonist James “Jimmy” Stowe, who at age 61 succumbed to prostate cancer. At Jimmy’s urging, Ralph and his two other brothers were screened, diagnosed, and successfully treated. With encouragement from his urologist, Ralph created the Jazz4PCA model to advocate for men’s wellness by supplying accurate information about prostate cancer and providing access to free or low-cost screenings, all while increasing exposure to live jazz music.

A special Lifetime Service Award will go to **Maud Dahme of Flemington**, who survived the Holocaust as a hidden child in the Netherlands. Ms. Dahme dedicated much of her adult life to education, and specifically Holocaust education, for both teachers and students in New Jersey. For more than 20 years, she led more than 750 members of the New Jersey Education Association on a tour of concentration camps in Europe. At 88 years old, Ms. Dahme continues to devote her energies to Holocaust and genocide education and remains active in the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education.

To learn more about each of the 2024 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Honorees, visit <https://russberriemakingadifferenceaward.org/>.

### **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 is the state’s premier public liberal arts college and is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding. The comprehensive college is situated among the beautiful Ramapo Mountains, is within commuting distance to New York City, was named one of the 50 Most Beautiful College Campuses in America by *CondéNast Traveler* and boasts the best on-campus housing in New Jersey per Niche.com. Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor’s degrees in the arts, business, data science, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work.

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