

## News Release



### **Inspiring Action, Touching Lives: 10 Changemakers Honored for Making New Jersey Stronger**

#### ***Russell Berrie Foundation Celebrates “Making a Difference Award” Honorees at 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Ceremony – Awards More Than \$150,000 to Advance Their Work***

MAHWAH, NJ – For nearly 30 years, The [Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award](#) has honored hundreds of unsung heroes who are making an indelible mark in cities and towns across the state. This year, the awards will celebrate the extraordinary impact of ten individuals whose leadership, dedication, and spirit have inspired and galvanized others to seek change through service.

Funded by The Russell Berrie Foundation and administered by Ramapo College, the award program’s 2025 honorees are advancing solutions that tackle challenges like homelessness and college readiness and break cycles of trauma and violence. Their tireless efforts have expanded opportunity and access to needed resources for thousands of individuals and families throughout New Jersey.

Established in 1997 by the late Russell Berrie, the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award honors New Jersey residents whose outstanding community service and heroic acts have made a substantial impact on people living in every corner of New Jersey. Since its inception, the program has awarded more than \$4 million to recognize the visionary, life-changing work of a total of 430 honorees. Over the years, honorees, ranging from nine to 90 years old, have collectively formed a powerful network that is a motivational force for good.

“These community champions are selfless, fearless, and committed to creating lasting change in people’s lives,” said Scott Berrie, vice president of The Russell Berrie Foundation. “My father, Russell Berrie, was passionate about lifting up unsung heroes and he would be



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deeply inspired by their innovation and dedication to addressing urgent issues and helping our neighbors in greatest need. It's an honor to recognize and celebrate these exceptional honorees."

On Friday, May 9, 2025, at Ramapo College of New Jersey, these ten outstanding changemakers will receive cash awards totaling \$152,500 to advance their vital work.

The 2025 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award honorees are:

**Sr. Patricia Prendergast of Atlantic City.** In 2002, Sister Patricia created Adelaide's Place, a daytime respite center that provides a safe space for homeless women. It's become an essential hub in the community where women can gain life skills and work with social workers and healthcare professionals to rebuild their lives and find permanent housing. ***She will receive the top award of \$50,000.***

**Ashante Taylorcox of Marlton.** Ashante founded You Are More Than, Inc., a survivor-led organization supporting marginalized LGBTQ and BIPOC survivors of exploitation and commercial sex trafficking. You Are More Than, Inc. provides trauma-informed mental health services, educational support, and pathways to financial stability. ***She will receive a \$25,000 award.***

**Nyene Baker of Trenton.** As founder of Visionary Philanthropy Group, Nyene developed a violence prevention and intervention program for at-risk youth with a unique focus on building technology skills through partnerships with tech companies that help young people achieve self-sufficiency and stability. ***He will receive a \$25,000 award.***

***Awards of \$7,500 will be presented to these individuals.***

**Julie Flores-Castillo of Red Bank.** As a 14-year-old, Julie suffered a life-altering experience with the immigration system. Now at age 21, she draws upon her personal experiences to advocate for immigrant youth and raise awareness of available resources and support.

**John El-Maraghy of Jersey City.** John created Archangel Raphael's Mission Inc. (ARM), a volunteer organization focused on restoring dignity to homeless individuals by providing mobile hygiene and health services in Newark, New Brunswick, and Hoboken. ARM also facilitates connections to housing and food resources, legal services, and more.



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**Lewis Spears of Jersey City.** Lewis is the founder of Kismet of Kings, an academic and leadership development organization that creates a positive environment and enriching experiences -- from camping to entrepreneurship -- to help young BIPOC men in Jersey City succeed and thrive.

**Robert Guarasci of Paterson.** Robert leads the New Jersey Community Development Corporation, a social service agency focusing on education, youth development, affordable and supportive housing, and community building initiatives. The organization assists 4,000 children, teens, and families daily through a range of cradle-to-career services.

**Desi Shelton of Camden.** Desi created the Camden Rep Theatre Company, a vibrant theater arts program that elevates urban female voices and prepares pre-professional young artists with college applications and auditions, while attracting new theatergoers to the community.

**William Keegan of East Brunswick.** Bill was a Port Authority Police lieutenant during the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and served as Night Operations Commander of the WTC Recovery Teams. After retiring he founded HEART 9/11 in 2007, a disaster response organization of volunteer first responders, construction workers and 9/11 family members that have responded to 362 disasters in 16 states and six countries.

**Peg Wright of Somerset.** Peg created the Center for Great Expectations in 1998, as a safe space for 12 homeless women who were pregnant and parenting. The center has grown into a nationally recognized model of trauma-informed care for more than 1,000 families annually through supportive housing, recovery programs, and a child development center.

#### **About The Russell Berrie Foundation**

The Russell Berrie Foundation identifies visionaries, institutions, and unsung heroes doing groundbreaking work and amplifies their impact with financial and strategic support. Focusing primarily on Northern New Jersey and Israel, the Foundation invests in leaders and organizations working to cultivate thriving Jewish communities, build bridges across differences, strengthen an inclusive and resilient Israel, and drive breakthroughs in diabetes care.

Learn more at [www.russellberriefoundation.org/](http://www.russellberriefoundation.org/).