Two Mahwah residents were among 11 winners of the Russ Berrie Foundation Award For Making a Difference. The group was collectively awarded $150,000 at a ceremony Wednesday afternoon to help fund the “good” they do in the community.

Winners from across the state were chosen from a pool of New Jersey residents nominated by their peers for being “unsung heroes” in the community.

“There is a very wonderful, dedicated committee that reviews all of the nominations we get, and the people who are finalists for the award each year come from all walks of life,” Angelica Berrie, who is President of the Russ Berrie Foundation on behalf of her late husband, said. “Russ had this idea to recognize people who are doing amazing things, but who aren’t getting the attention they deserve.”

At the sixteenth annual ceremony Wednesday afternoon at Ramapo College in Mahwah, eight finalists were awarded $5,000.

Eric Fuchs-Stengel, a Mahwah teenager who founded MEVO, the Mahwah Environmental Volunteer Organization, was one of the finalists. “I couldn’t believe I was chosen,” he said. “The $5,000 is more than we’ve been able to raise in four years, so that is just amazing.”

The group, which organizes volunteer students, “constantly relies on a new people joining, so getting recognition like this is such a huge help. I am hoping that this will get people psyched about giving back to the community and the environment.”

Jessica Gotthold, a Mahwah resident who founded the National Foundation for Animal Rescue (NFFAR) also received $5,000 as a finalist. “The one thing my parents always taught me was to be passionate about what you do. I believe so much in this cause, and to have it showcased with this award is really important.”

The top three winners were awarded cash prizes of $25, $35 and $50,000, all to be used to grow charities and organizations they founded.
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Boje Berrie called the annual ceremony “the most inspiring day of my year.”

Ramapo College described all of the winners’ accomplishments:

Ron Snipes of Perth Amboy received the $25,000 award. Snipes, a comedian, demonstrated a most serious side when he saved a man who wanted to commit suicide by jumping off the 100-foot high Victory Bridge spanning the Raritan River in Perth Amboy. Without hesitation, Snipes pulled over, rushed to the railing, grabbed the man’s arm and strained to keep hold until the police arrived. The man’s despair resonated with Snipes, who uses his line of work to raise money for those who can’t afford help for emotional issues. Snipes, who received the Perth Amboy Police Department’s Good Samaritan Award for his actions, continues to support the man he saved by donating a portion of what he earns by performing to his care.

Taking home the $35,000 award was fifteen-year-old Zachary Certner of Morristown. He is the co-founder of Special Needs Awareness and Athletic Programs, a.k.a. SNAP. The program provides social and recreational programs to more than 150 special needs children with little or no access to peer-related activities. The programs use peer mentors, often students, who provide a one-on-one relationship with the children. To date, 350 mentors have dedicated 5,000 hours of community service for the programs. The latest SNAP endeavor is a sensitivity and anti-bullying training workshop that will be attended by all third to fifth graders in the Morristown school district. Certner has taken his message of awareness and acceptance to all parts of the Morristown community and, in the process, has raised more than $60,000 for SNAP.

Blanca Molina of North Bergen was awarded a $50,000 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference. Molina is the executive director of Centro en Union para El Salvador, called CEUS. The organization was established in 1993 and is based in Union City. Molina’s bi-lingual networking skills bring together diverse elements in the community for the good of the whole. Molina has been described as a person who can’t say “No.” With the support of civic groups, churches and educational groups, her achievements are many. In the past 19 years, more than 2,000 students have attended English classes and Spanish literacy sessions and more than 2,000 residents have been helped with affordable immigration legal services. CEUS also has sponsored numerous Latino cultural events, youth and adult leadership development workshops and a women’s empowerment group. In addition, Molina organized fund raising drives to help survivors of earthquakes and hurricanes in El Salvador.

The following people received $5,000 awards:

JoAnn McCullough of Montclair has led the Improving Montclair Achievement Network Initiative (IMANI) and College Advocacy Center since its founding in 1998 as a collaborative effort between the Montclair Public Schools, parents and community members. The Initiative was started to help address the minority achievement gap in Montclair at the high school. McCullough helped parents form a Mini-Imani for children enrolled in K – 5. Low or no cost programs include Sunday study groups led by certified teachers, PSAT and SAT prep programs, college placement advice and essay coaching. More than a dozen volunteers work with high school students on essay writing. In the spring, more than 100 students are enrolled in the SAT and PSAT prep programs. In the summer, McCullough organizes a transition to middle school and high school academic enrichment course for incoming sixth and ninth graders. Most recently, she launched a mentoring and academic support program for middle school boys. McCullough has proven herself a woman for all seasons.

Janet Farrand of Long Valley is president of Foster and Adoptive Family Services. She’s been active with the organization for more than 20 years. As founder of the Fostering Wishes for Children program, part of Foster and Adoptive Family Services, more than 1,200 wishes were granted, allowing children the little extras in life such as art or music lessons or items needed to attend a prom. She also supports the organization’s Camp Scholarship program that treats children in foster care to a week at sleep away camp. Farrand is a driving force in the creation and passing of the Tuition Waiver Bill that provides eligible foster youth with full tuition to college, university or vocational school. She has had a profound effect on the lives of foster children in the state. In 2011, Farrand was named the Grace Boskey Volunteer of the Year by the Advocates for Children of New Jersey. Farrand and her husband, foster parents since 1989, adopted two children who were in foster care.

Eric Fuchs-Stengel of Mahwah is executive director of the Mahwah Environmental Volunteers Organization, Inc., an organization begun in 2008. He also is a college student studying Global Environmental Studies and Environmental Science. The organization recruits students and each month plans volunteer events on the weekends. Fuchs-Stengel has a passion for the natural environment and an ambitious plan to engage students in environmental volunteer work to help create an environmentally sustainable world. Among the activities sponsored are trash clean-ups at parks, the distribution of compact fluorescent light bulbs and the rehabilitation of soil erosion on hiking trails. He’s engaged more than 200 students in volunteering, performing more than 2,500 hours of service and 3,200 hours of administrative volunteer work. Fuchs-Stengel is helping to establish a chapter in Essex County and a sustainable farming program, Farm to Live.

Jessica Gathold of Mahwah established the National Foundation for Animal Rescue (NFFAR) in 2003 to channel her desire to help animals who cannot help themselves. The no-kill animal rescue organization is run by volunteers. The primary mission is to diminish the population of homeless and abandoned animals through ethical and humane means. Through NFFAR, she also has created an adoption foster program for companion animals and a Trap-Neuter-Return program for unadoptable feral cats. Low-cost spay/neuter and micro-chipping is also available to the public. Options and hope are offered particularly to people who have lost their jobs and can no longer keep their pets. The Boy and Girl Scouts, and local high school groups, have joined her efforts. In 2009 Gathold was one of the top 10 finalists in Animal Planet’s Hero of the Year contest.

Barry Hackett of West Atlantic City has made the South Jersey Field of Dreams in Absecon a reality. The baseball field provides physically and mentally disabled children and adults a place to play baseball, form friendships and make lasting memories. The specially designed field features a surface that allows walkers and wheelchairs to navigate smoothly as players travel base-to-base. Best of all, participation in the league is free. There are no age or handicap restrictions and no score is kept. Games are played in the spring and fall. The league has grown from about 60 players and six teams, to more than 220 players on 12 teams. They come from six different counties. Hackett has proven if you build it, they will come.

Kevin Hoagland of New Brunswick suffered a spinal cord injury when he was an 18-year-old college student. Confined to a wheelchair, he successfully ran for the office of Surrogate of Middlesex County. He married and had two children. In 1987 he formed the Central Jersey Spinal Cord Association. Hoagland’s vision is to bring awareness to the need to find a cure for paralysis resulting from spinal cord injuries, to provide financial support to research organizations focused on finding that cure and to provide financial assistance to people who have suffered spinal cord injuries so that they may purchase adaptive equipment and modify their homes and cars. With no paid employees and run by volunteers, Hoagland’s leadership as president has resulted in more than $1.5 million distributed to organizations such as The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. More than $750,000 has been contributed to individuals in central New Jersey to help them adapt their homes, vehicles and workplaces. Hoagland enjoys the satisfaction of knowing that he has made a difference in the lives of
Malcolm Sutherland-Foggio of Florham Park is the 13-year-old founder of a non-profit organization, Make Some Noise: Cure Kids Cancer Foundation. The teen, who has battled Ewing's sarcoma, a pediatric bone cancer, says one of the goals of the foundation is to dispel the misconception that kids’ cancer is rare. He noted that one in 300 children in the United States is diagnosed with cancer. Sutherland-Foggio was diagnosed at age 10. He endured 14 rounds of chemotherapy, surgery to remove his hip, rehabilitation and keeping up with school work. He realized that he saw no awareness for pediatric cancers and decided to tackle the challenges of raising awareness and much needed private funding to support research.

Clark and Jean Paradise of Toms River began Your Grandmother’s Cupboard in 2004 to serve the homeless in a local tent city. The couple soon discovered that the homeless needed not only food, but clothing, blankets, shoes and personal care items. They use a donated space in Toms River where donations are dropped off and sorted by volunteers. Trucks are filled with the donated items and delivered to more than 20 locations throughout New Jersey. The stops include food banks, soup kitchens, shelters and community centers. The Cupboard also has a food pantry that serves more than 300 people each month. Clark is a former president of New Jersey Easter Seals and Jean is a retired school teacher. Collectively, their hearts have a lot to give.
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