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**UNSUNG HEROES DISTINGUISHED AS FINALISTS  
FOR RUSS BERRIE AWARD FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

***19 New Jersey Residents to be Honored for Giving Back to Their Communities***

MAHWAH, N.J., May 22, 2005 – Among the 19 finalists considered for the 2006 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference are teens who put themselves at risk to rescue others, guardians of two of New Jersey's treasures – one natural, one historic, and advocates for the poor and disabled both here and in Third World countries.

These New Jerseyans will be honored during ceremonies at Ramapo College of New Jersey in Mahwah on June 1. The top three finalists, chosen by a selection committee comprising eminent New Jersey business leaders and professionals, will receive cash awards of \$50,000, \$35,000 and \$25,000. Other finalists will receive grants of \$2,500.

Emmy Award-winning broadcaster Steve Aduato will host the awards program. Delivering the keynote address will be former Governor and current Senate President Richard J. Codey.

This year's finalists include:

**Amal Abdallah** of **Lyndhurst** recruits volunteers for the Palisades Emergency Residence Corporation, a shelter for single homeless people. To launch a second shelter for families, Ms. Abdallah, who is Palestinian, and the shelter's executive director, who is Jewish, brought together teenage girls, some Muslim, some Jewish, and formed committees to raise funds (more than \$13,000 to date) and help out at the shelter. Through her guidance, the girls are blossoming into mature leaders willing to look at the other side with compassion.

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Four decades of service as a volunteer with American Red Cross blood services and disaster services earned a nomination for **Andrew Bertone of Rutherford**. As a member of the board of directors of the Bergen-Hudson Chapter and a Blood Services Leadership Team member, he staffs blood drives and trains and supports new volunteers. Since the early '60s, he and his wife, Pauline, have organized twice yearly municipal blood drives for the Rutherford Community Blood Bank. Throughout his life, Mr. Bertone has combined civic and government service, as Rutherford's director of civil defense, director of the town's Office of Emergency Management, councilman and mayor.

**Clyde Briggs of Somerset** has dedicated his life to preventing young people from becoming involved with drugs, gangs and violence. Sentenced to life in prison at 22, he embarked on a journey of self-exploration, accountability and liberation. He developed intervention strategies to deter youth from following a similar path, one of which resulted in the Lifer's Group, recognized for its Scared Straight program. In 1992, Mr. Briggs became the only New Jerseyan to earn release from a life sentence through good behavior. Today, in addition to holding a full-time job, he volunteers and works part-time to create positive alternatives to incarceration.

For 12 years, **Fred Carl of Wall** has worked tirelessly to save Camp Evans as a history/science center. The U.S. Army camp, which served as a site for telecommunications research and development, is associated with many science luminaries including Marconi, Einstein and Alexander Graham Bell. Through InfoAge, a nonprofit agency, Mr. Carl convinced others, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Congressman Chris Smith, to support his vision. Now, after hard-fought legal and jurisdictional battles and a personal investment of \$30,000, four buildings are in use and a 1914 hotel is nearly ready to open.

**Joe Collins of Morristown**, on a visit to Guatemala in 1999, observed extreme poverty: no electricity, women and children sleeping on the streets, and children deprived of school because they lacked money for fees and supplies. After four years of spending summers and vacations there volunteering, he founded the nonprofit organization, Houses to Homes – Guatemala. Since the organization's start in January 2005, the group has built 32 houses. Currently, with the help of 33 volunteers from 11 different countries, the organization is completing two houses a month. In addition, Collins is now raises funds to pay for Guatemalan children to attend school.

**Monsignor Michael Doyle** has spent more than 40 years fighting for the people of **Camden** and working to make his town a better place to live. Each year, his grammar school educates approximately 250 students- most of them non-Catholic and all of them disadvantaged - providing the opportunity to be successful. He founded The Heart of Camden more than 20 years ago, an organization to renovate abandoned housing and assist low-income families to become homeowners. He established a free health clinic for the uninsured and has fought the environmental degradation of Camden by industry and government.

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**Paul Gingras** of **Teaneck** rescued two children from a horrific fire that claimed the lives of four others and badly injured their mother and nanny. When thick black smoke prevented him from entering the front of the house, he got his extension ladder, yelled to his wife to call 911 and asked neighbors to get flashlights. Even after inhaling some of the dense smoke, he climbed to the roof of the front porch toward a little hand reaching out through the window, and then guided a young girl onto the ladder. As neighbors pointed their flashlights at the house, he helped another girl onto the ladder and brought them both to safety. Mr. Gingras doesn't think of himself as a hero and credits his neighbors' help. "I just happened to live there and just happened to have a ladder," he said.

**Daria Lojik** of **Wayne** has selflessly given of herself by volunteering for the first aid squad, fostering and adopting children in crisis and participating in numerous community service groups. A volunteer EMT for the Wayne First Aid Squad for more than 15 years, she was recognized for risking her life to rescue a person from a burning home. Throughout the past eight years, more than 70 abused and neglected children have become part of her family. She adopted three boys and plans to become a "regular" in the Passaic County adoption court. Honored in 2002 with the Foster Family of the Year Award, she continues to recruit new foster parents, and helps organize an annual holiday toy drive for the county's foster children.

**Carmela Lunt** of **Mendham** is the founding president and executive director of Community Hope, a social service agency that creates housing and services for those with mental illnesses. As president of the board, she has governed the expansion of Project Hope, now known as Community Hope, from a single group home in Dover for five young adults to a continuum of supported housing serving 185 individuals and plans to serve 230 this year. Prompted by the mental illness of a family member, she became an advocate and activist, enlisting the support of former NJ State Assemblyman (now Congressman) Rodney Frelinghuysen, who, in 1985, sponsored a special legislative appropriation of \$75,000 to help fund the purchase of a single-family residence for individuals with mental illness.

Only 17, **Anthony Marzocca** of **Wayne** worked alongside his father to pull two children from a burning car after it hit tree and burst into flames, spinning 180 degrees in the air before landing on the shoulder. Finding the car doors locked and unable to break the side window, Anthony crawled through the blown-out rear window to get the children to safety. But this is not the first time his actions helped another. In 2001, he rescued a skier in distress who had skied off a cliff. For both actions, Anthony was recognized by the National Court of Honor for the Boy Scouts of America.

**T. J. Moehler** of **Bayville** saw his 10-year old neighbor chased down the street and bitten by a 75-pound pit bull dog. The younger boy had received wounds to his hand, back and feet. T.J., then 16 and wearing a cast on his right arm because of a football injury, beat the dog with his cast, giving his neighbor time to get to a nearby house for safety. When the dog turned on T.J., he leaped onto the roof of his mother's car, trapped, as the dog continued to bite at his feet. Police and first aid personnel who arrived on the scene say the neighbor, whose toe had to be surgically re-attached, might have died if T.J. had not beaten off the dog.

Despite the risks associated with major surgery and the uncertainty of his future health, **Joseph Obrochta** of **Woodcliff Lake** donated a kidney to his best friend, Garrett Gurrieri, in 2005. The two have been friends since seventh grade and both attended Ramapo College. Through prolonged testing and absences from work, Obrochta shrugged off any notions of fear or inconvenience to help his friend, who was diagnosed at age 12 with a rare kidney disease that put him in end stage renal disease, despite two previous and ultimately unsuccessful transplants, that required daily dialysis treatment. Says Gurrieri, "Our friendship started almost 15 years ago. It is a wonderful feeling to know it will endure a lifetime. Joey gave my life back. He is a wonderful human being."

**Leonard Pine** of **Wayne** is co-chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Foundation for the Handicapped, an organization that employs physically and mentally disabled persons. The retired optometrist is hailed as the Foundation's organizing force and major benefactor. The employees, many of whom having hearing, vision and speech impairments, or who are developmentally disabled or have multiple handicaps, carry out hand-processing jobs such as parts labeling, product packaging, collating and assembly. The workshop opened in 1968 with one part-time volunteer director and eight employees. There are now five paid supervisors, one paid director, six volunteers and 47 disabled employees from Passaic, Bergen, Morris and Essex Counties.

**Douglas S. Roberts** of **Oxford** is director of programs for The Seeing Eye, Inc., located in Morristown. Training a guide dog, matching the dog to a blind person and instructing them together is a subtle and complex process and Roberts is the world's leading expert in this field, says Kenneth Rosenthal, president of The Seeing Eye. Roberts' association with the organization began 38 years ago. Now, as chief program officer and dean of the faculty, he has shaped the curriculum to adapt to a more dangerous world, vital for the safety of 1,700 Americans and Canadians who travel independently with their Seeing Eye dogs and for accredited guide dog programs worldwide that rely on him as an Assessor for the International Guide Dog Federation.

At age 17, **Amani Shakur** of **Newark** was sentenced to 25 years in prison. While incarcerated, he served as vice president of the Lifer's Group's Juvenile Awareness Program, working to inform youths of the realities of prison life. Following his release, he started work as a heavy equipment operator and began volunteering his time talking to youths in schools, community centers, juvenile correction centers and halfway houses. He has helped broker truces between street gangs and organized a group of ex-offenders to start Street Warriors, a non-profit organization to spread a pro-education, anti-violence message on street. Early this year, the Street Warriors opened a storefront youth center on Linden Street in Newark as a safe haven during the critical after-school and weekend hours.

**Sa'idah Sharif** of **Roselle** was at work as the administrative coordinator in the emergency department of University Hospital in Newark when she encountered a Muslim woman waiting to speak to a social worker. Sharif asked if she could help. The woman admitted she was beaten regularly by her husband. Ms. Sharif immediately understood that Islamic women have different needs from other victims of abuse and knew she had found her calling. Now, as the founder and director of the state's only support service for Muslim domestic violence victims, she says, "I know what to do and what not to do." Named Baitul Hemayah, Arabic for "House of Protection," the center she founded has provided referrals and counseling to more than 200 women. She plans to open a shelter in Newark. "With a building," she says, "I'll never have to turn anyone away."

Since the mid-90s, **Captain Bill Sheehan** of **Hackensack** has led eco-cruises of the Hackensack River Watershed, taking six people at a time on his boat to see a range of wildlife including bald eagles. In 1997, he founded the Hackensack Riverkeeper to protect the environment and inhabitants of the river. As executive director, he provides environmental advocacy, education and conservation programs. He is a member of many environmental and public interest organizations, and serves as chairman of the Meadowlands Conversation Trust, the state board charged with identifying and facilitating the acquisition of open space in the Meadowlands and throughout the watershed of the Hackensack River.

For 30 years, **Father Ronald Stanley** of **Midland Park**, a Catholic campus chaplain, has been traveling to a small village in the remote mountains of the Dominican Republic to help build a stronger community. About 10 years ago, he began taking groups of college students with him. Twice a year, they work in the community and live for with poor farming families, usually without electricity, flush toilets or paved roads. They work to rebuild homes and roads, provide electricity and fund education needs. They have distributed hundreds of pounds of clothing, vitamins, medicine, books and toys, all the while bridging First and Third World people.

On January 27, 2006 **Wojtek Szyszko** of **Lawrenceville**, an after school volunteer with his town's fire company, responded to a near fatal motor vehicle accident involving a tractor-trailer and a sedan in which two victims were trapped. In spite of the extreme safety concerns, including the possibility of one of the vehicles exploding, after determining that the victims were still alive, Szyszko used power rescue tools and worked for more than an hour to extricate the passenger of the sedan. The president of the fire company says Szyszko's uncommon and unique abilities include his youthful determination to become a leader, his willingness to listen and learn, and to proactively make a commitment to gain new skills.

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