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## NEW JERSEY'S UNSUNG HEROES DISTINGUISHED AS FINALISTS FOR RUSS BERRIE AWARD FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE

### *19 State Residents to be Honored for Giving Back to Their Communities*

MAHWAH, N.J., May 12, 2008 – Ceremonies to present the 2008 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference and honor Garden State residents for their unselfish dedication to serving others will take place May 21 at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

Among the 19 finalists are a high schooler who has been working raise awareness about autism, a teacher who created a program to provide at risk students with the tools they need to graduate, a photographer who established a portrait gallery to find permanent homes for adoption eligible children in foster care and a nurse leading efforts to establish a permanent health clinic in a remote area of Haiti.

These New Jerseyans will be honored during ceremonies at Ramapo College of New Jersey in Mahwah on May 21. 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 from the Russell Berrie Foundation. Other finalists will receive grants of \$2,500.

The awards were created in 1998 by the late Russell Berrie to recognize the unsung heroes who work for the benefit of others.

This year's finalists include:

**Marie Ardizzone** of **Bergenfield** has participated in 24 medical missions overseas and within the U.S., bringing much needed medical care to those in need. A volunteer with Healing the Children (HTC) Midlantic since 1984, she has helped deliver medical care to over 5,400 children and opened her home to children brought to the United States for medical treatment unavailable in their native countries.

Twelve-year-old **Samuel Baker** of **Mount Tabor** was adopted from Guatemala as an infant. He looked forward to accompanying his parents, volunteers with From Houses to Homes, on a

mission to the country of his birth, eager to help. When he learned that many Guatemalan children cannot afford to participate in the annual kite festival celebrating the Day of the Dead, he collected more than 100 kites to take along and give to the children. Since returning from that visit, Sam has spoken to parishioners at Assumption Church in Morristown about his experience, raising \$6,000, enough for four more homes, and inspiring other volunteers to join the effort.

**Chaya Bender of Lakewood** was a high school student when she started the Special Children's Center as an after school program for seven children with developmental disabilities. Over the last 12 years, the center has grown into a full-service respite and family support agency for children, offering a daily after school program, summer camp, 48-hour weekend respite, 24-hour overnight respite, case management and other services, all at no cost, to families.

Upon hearing of three homeless Vietnam veterans living under a railroad trestle in Dover, **Ray Chimileski of Califon** went to see for himself. He found a dozen men living under an outcropping of rock, without basic winter clothing. That year, Operation Chillout was launched as an interfaith, grassroots coalition of volunteers dedicated to easing the burden of homeless people throughout northern New Jersey. The program has grown to include voluntary contributions from knitting groups, local businesses and merchants and law enforcement to help those in need. Last December, 60 Operation Chillout volunteers delivered 600 duffel bags to the homeless and 75 gift bags to battered women. Hoping to create a non-profit organization to expand his work, Ray never turns down an opportunity to talk about easing the burden of homelessness, one person at a time.

Because of the persistence of **Matthew Cortland of Marlton**, his high school was the first to organize students and raise money for autism research. His organization, S.T.A.R. (Students Together for Autism Research), inspired other high schools to start chapters to raise money that will benefit the 1.5 million people living with autism. In addition to serving his high school community with passion and enthusiasm, he ranks among the top scholars in his class, is an excellent musician and accomplished actor, all by the age of 17.

When English teacher **Susan K. DeAppolonio of North Plainfield** noticed a rising number of students failing to graduate, she established the Intervention Instruction Program to provide students with the tools needed to graduate high school. Tailored to meet the needs of each student, the program offers extra tutoring sessions, motivational speakers, educational trips, counseling and anger management as group sessions on self esteem, social skills and career counseling. The program provides intensive daily monitoring and supervision for at-risk ninth-graders throughout their high school years.

**Carmen F. DeGregorio, Jr. of Millville**, who retired from the police force after 25 years of service, was in a convenience store parking lot when he saw an attempted kidnapping. DeGregorio stepped between the victim and abductor as a man was trying to put a woman into the trunk of his vehicle. DeGregorio pulled the man away, freed the woman and began to walk with her into the store to safety. When he saw the man – the victim's boyfriend -- back behind the wheel, he told her to continue into the store while he distracted the driver by running in the opposite direction. The boyfriend ran down DeGregorio with his car and inflicted injuries that ended the life of the 51-year-old husband and father of twin daughters.

**William D. Elliott** of **Somers Point** lost his only son, 22-year-old Navy Ensign John Elliott, in 2000 when another car crashed into him head on. Ensign Elliot was on his way home for his mother's birthday celebration on the night of the accident. The other driver, who earlier had been stopped by police for drunken driving, posted bail, recovered his keys and got back behind the wheel. An hour later, both drivers were dead. Because of the efforts of William Elliott and his wife, Muriel, New Jersey enacted John's Law, requiring police to impound the vehicles of suspected drunk drivers for 12 hours. A federal version was enacted in 2005. As a further legacy to the memory of their son, the Elliotts established the HERO Campaign for Designated Drivers® to prevent accidents like the one that cut short the life of their son, an honors graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy.

The complex problems of the Passaic River Watershed have occupied **Dr. Ella Filippone** of **Basking Ridge** for nearly 40 years. From flood control to managing ground water supplies to removing decades of industrial pollution from the Passaic's waters, she has actively participated in federal and state initiatives to preserve the watershed. Nearly two million New Jersey residents live within a mile of the river, which traverses four counties and 14 municipalities. Dr. Fillipone continues working to make her vision of a clean, environmentally healthy Passaic River a reality to be enjoyed by all New Jerseyans.

When photographer **Najlah Feanny Hicks** of **Clifton** and her co-founder began the Heart Gallery of New Jersey, her only thoughts were of the foster children caught in New Jersey's child welfare system. Though eligible for adoption, many languished in the system for years. She enlisted the help of photographers and editors to capture the smiles of nearly 350 children to create a traveling portrait collection, and then launched a Web site and marketing campaign to bring their plight to the attention of potential parents. Because of her efforts, nearly half of the first group of Gallery children have been adopted and have permanent, loving homes.

**Juanita Hines** of **Orange** has made the trip to Newark Penn Station every Saturday morning for the last 20 years, bringing food to the homeless and those in need. Living on Social Security and the pay she earns by cleaning houses, she purchases food and prepares sandwiches, soups, stews and, when funds allow, fried chicken, which has earned her the affectionate title of "the chicken lady." Learning of her personal mission, the members of her church now provide a stipend to supplement what she contributes. In nominating Juanita, her employer described her as "a truly remarkable person who is quietly carrying out a personal mission to feed the homeless, which is the centerpiece of her life."

Helping America's wounded warriors is the goal of **Stanley Kuchar** of **Saddle River**, founder of Bold, Brave and Courageous. To help service members recovering from injuries received in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kuchar and his group of volunteers collect personal items such as DVD players, sweats, underwear, socks and toiletries and deliver them to army medical facilities. To date more than 3,000 buddy bags have been delivered to service personnel facing long recuperation and rehabilitation. Through his company, Kuchar also offers technical training to local veterans and has helped families unable to afford them obtain a laptop computer.

**Diane Gloria Marichal** of **Paramus** established Helping People Help Themselves to provide hope for orphaned and underprivileged children from the inner city. A survivor of her own interrupted adolescence, Marichal recently purchased a farmhouse, Destiny's Gate, on 76 acres of land in West Milford in hopes of providing recreational activities such as swimming, volleyball, hiking, art and theater classes.

During her first visit to a small mountain village Haiti, **Dianne Montuori, R.N.** of **Hackensack** vowed to return six months later with a team to provide much needed medical services to the impoverished area. To keep that promise, she recruited a team of medical professionals and translators and gathered medicines and supplies. They worked from a temporary clinic in a one room building without running water or electricity. One visit has evolved into semi-annual trips. To date, Dianne Montuori has made nine trips to Haiti and is now working with her church and Nova Hope for Haiti to establish a permanent clinic with a full-time staff with regular visits by specialty medical teams.

**Newfoundland** resident **Marion "Mayme" Puccio's** lifetime of service began when she was a young wife and mother, feeding the poor and helping street people in her community. She purchased a former crack house in Paterson and turned it into Trinity Retreat House, a place to care for people and animals who had no other safe haven. She helped addicts and prostitutes get into detox programs, often driving them to treatment centers in her truck. She started a baseball team to steer youngsters away from drugs and into sports and campaigned against the practice of dog fighting, even diverting what money she had for her own needs to purchase dogs about to be used as bait. From her current home, she continues to rescue homeless and abused animals and provide for heroin addicts in Newark at a detox center in Paramus. She hopes to open another facility in an urban area to provide shelter from the streets for both people and animals.

**Scott Reddin** of **Englewood** worked to make his city a great place to live as a member of the City Council. To do what government alone cannot accomplish, he has been an active volunteer with numerous organizations for more than 20 years. He spearheaded an alumni organization at Dwight Morrow High School to provide scholarships and grants, and served as president of the Center for Food Action, a multi-million dollar organization providing food, rental and utility assistance to those in need. He has been involved with the Big Brother program for almost 13 years through the Volunteers in Protective Services program and was named Mentor of the Year. In the 32-year history of Shelter Our Sisters, Reddin is the only male selected Volunteer of the Year. When asked about his volunteer spirit, Reddin said he learned about the importance of volunteering as a member of a family whose motto was "If you've got time, give it."

As a college student, **Robert Relay** of **Rivervale** volunteered his time to work with children. He found the work rewarding and as his children grew, continued to work with youngsters as a coach and school volunteer. But since the September 11 terror attacks, he has been an active member of Volunteers in Protective Services (VIPS). Although VIPS asks for a one-year commitment, Bob Relay has mentored one child since 2002 and continues his relationship with a second child, who has since moved to Pennsylvania, through regular visits. By matching caring, qualified adults like Relay with children who have suffered neglect and/or abuse, VIPS attempts to break the cycle of neglect and abuse.

**Carol Scullin** of **Morristown** has helped homebound seniors receive nutritious meals as a volunteer with Morristown Meals on Wheels for the past 27 years. In 1981, as a busy mom to four children, she delivered meals once a week. In 1988, she assumed the responsibilities of Volunteer Coordinator, recruiting and managing the corps of volunteers, creating and maintaining delivery schedules, handling administrative details and serving as liaison to Morristown Memorial Hospital, which prepares the food. Two years ago, she became president of the organization and immediately set about updating the organization's communications vehicles and intensifying fundraising efforts to help subsidize the cost of meals for those who can't afford them. Although Meals on Wheels delivers 150 meals each week, Carol Scullin makes an effort to get to know each client personally. She often goes above and beyond to lend assistance, visiting the hospital to see an 87-year-old client who broke a hip, arranging for a motorized wheelchair and ramp for another and finding a county agency to help another solve his housing problems.

**Dr. Nancy Wolff** of **Cranbury** is the director of the Center for Mental Health Services and Criminal Justice Research at Rutgers University. As part of her studies of the mental health of incarcerated women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County, she observed that the imprisoned women were strongly motivated to improve their literacy. Also observing that prison libraries are limited, Dr. Wolff provided books. She expanded her book purchases and also arranged for motivation speakers to visit the prison. Now called "Books Behind Bars" (BBB), the organization provides books and speakers to address anxiety, depression, domestic violence, substance abuse, parenting, overcoming obstacles, victimization and other issues. BBB raises funds to purchase books that focus on self-help and recovery. Dr. Wolff also runs two discussion groups, one in a maximum-security prison and another in a minimum security facility. Women who participate in the discussion groups testify to enhancing self-esteem, hope and self-respect as a result of the BBB program. The State of New Jersey is considering adopting the idea for other facilities in New Jersey, and other states have also shown an interest.

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