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Contact: Cynthia Burns: cyburns@ramapo.edu or Cathleen Davey: cdavey@ramapo.edu

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BERRIE FOUNDATION PAYS TRIBUTE TO NEW JERSEY'S UNSUNG HEROES FOR ACTS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

Recipients of 2008 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference Honored at Ramapo College Ceremony

MAHWAH, N.J., May 21, 2008 – Photographer **Najlah Feanny Hicks** of **Clifton**, co-founder of the Heart Gallery of New Jersey, earned a \$50,000 cash grant from the Russell Berrie Foundation as winner of the 2008 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference. Since she conceived the idea of a traveling portrait gallery to publicize the plight of adoption-eligible children mired in the foster care system, over 100 children have been adopted into permanent, loving homes.

Taking home the \$35,000 award was **Juanita Hines** of **Orange**, who, every Saturday morning for the last 20 years, has traveled to Newark Penn Station to distribute sandwiches, soups and stews to the homeless and needy who affectionately call her “the chicken lady.”

Chaya Bender of **Lakewood** was awarded the \$25,000 grant. As a high school student, 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.

In all, 19 finalists were selected by a committee comprising eminent New Jersey business leaders and professionals. Established in 1997 by the late Russell Berrie and administered by Ramapo College of New Jersey, the Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference honors Garden State residents for their unselfish dedication to serving others.

This year’s keynote speaker was Dr. David Butler, whose role in bringing medical care to women in Haiti earned him a 2005 Russ Berrie Award.

Cash awards of \$2,500 each were presented to the remaining finalists, who 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. While in the country helping to build homes, he learned that many Guatemalan children couldn't afford to participate in the annual kite festival celebrating the Day of the Dead. He collected more than 100 kites to give to the children during his first visit to the country of his birth. 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.

Investigating a rumor of three homeless Vietnam veterans living under a railroad trestle in Dover, **Ray Chimileski** of **Califon** 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. Last December, 60 Operation Chillout volunteers delivered 600 duffel bags to the homeless and 75 gift bags to battered women. Chimileski is hoping to create a non-profit organization to expand his work.

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, he ranks among the top scholars in his class, is an excellent musician and accomplished actor.

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 stopped an attempted kidnapping. DeGregorio stepped between the victim and her abductor as he was trying to put her 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 get back behind the wheel, he distracted the driver by running in the opposite direction. The abductor ran down DeGregorio with his car and inflicted injuries that ended the life of the 51-year-old husband and father of twins.

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. 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. Filippone continues working to make her vision of a clean, environmentally healthy Passaic River a reality to be enjoyed by all New Jerseyans.

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 in 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 a place to care for people and animals that had no other safe haven. She helped addicts and prostitutes get into detox programs, started a baseball team to steer youngsters away from drugs and into sports and campaigned against the practice of dog fighting. From her current home, she continues to rescue the homeless and abused. 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 and 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. 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. 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 or abuse, VIPS attempts to break the cycle.

Carol Scullin of **Morristown** has helped homebound seniors receive nutritious meals as a volunteer with Morristown Meals on Wheels for the past 27 years. A busy mom to four children, she delivered meals once a week. In 1988, she became 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. She makes an effort to get to know each client personally, often going 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 saw that the imprisoned women were strongly motivated to improve their literacy. She provided books to the prison library, expanded her book purchases and arranged for motivational speakers to visit the prison. Now called “Books Behind Bars” (BBB), the program provides books and speakers to address anxiety, depression, domestic violence, substance abuse, parenting, overcoming obstacles, victimization and other issues, and raises funds to purchase books that focus on self-help and recovery. State officials are considering adopting the idea for other facilities in New Jersey, and other states have also shown an interest in adopting the program.