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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 - Ceremonies to present the 2009 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference and honor Garden State residents for their unselfish dedication to serving others will take place Wednesday, May 20 at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

Among the 19 finalists are a hospital patient care technician who risked her life to rescue a driver from a flipped gas tanker that exploded, a volunteer EMT who has made more than 5,000 calls and used CPR to save 19 lives and the founder of an organization that improves the lives of Maasai school children and villagers in Kenya.

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 1997 by the late Russell Berrie to recognize the unsung heroes who work for the benefit of others.

This year's finalists include:

**Imma Ugomma Ayanwu** of **Maplewood**, a special education teacher, understands the particular needs of her students. She extends her compassion beyond the classroom to help those with special needs wherever she finds them. Her commitment to community service encompasses Newark and Nigeria. She and her husband, Emeruwa, founded the Amazing Grace Prayer Ministry that has grown to more than 60 members offering marriage encounters, counseling and prayer services. The ministry serves several Newark soup kitchens, churches and nursing homes. Her work also includes volunteering time and money to provide food, clothing and medical assistance to better the lives of orphans, the homeless and medical patients in Nigeria. Each year Ayanwu organizes a fund raising concert, Mercy Medical Mission to Nigeria, to attract philanthropic support for the ministry's work.

In 1993 **Marguerite Baber's** son was diagnosed with autism. The lack of appropriate services was a source of frustration for the **Bayonne** mother. Although she had the financial resources to provide private services for her son until he was able to attend a

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public school program, she wanted to make these services available to other parents who did not. She established the Simpson-Baber Foundation, comprised of volunteers affiliated with public schools, private businesses, universities, medical practitioners, the Bayonne Medical Center, parents and the Office of the Mayor. The Foundation supports the Busy Bees Program in partnership with the Bayonne Medical Center, The Board of Education and the Mayor to provide early intervention services for children with autism. The Medical Center provides the room and other services at no charge to the Foundation and there are no fees charged to families. The success of the program is evident in the outcomes. Many children are educated in public school and have developed friendships with children in their communities.

Friends describe **Terry Carroll of Upper Saddle River** as a guardian angel. She was nominated for her life-long commitment to helping children with medical needs. For more than 10 years, she was a volunteer and spokesperson for Healing the Children, an organization dedicated to helping children throughout the world receive medical care unavailable in their own countries. She hosted 14 children, nine of whom stayed at her home. Carroll is a nurse and many times the child's family members stay with her to learn how to care for the child upon their return home. Perhaps her most selfless act was the adoption of a Guatemalan girl, who stayed with the Carrolls from age 2 to 3 to receive medical care and recuperate. A year later she returned for another surgery, but her family warned that the child would not survive in Guatemala because of lack of appropriate medical care. Terry Carroll and her husband adopted the child and made her a permanent part of their family.

**Linda Walder Fiddle**, an attorney from **Ridgewood**, has turned tragedy into triumph. She is the founder and executive director of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation. She created the foundation in memory of her son Danny, who had Autism Spectrum Disorder and died at age 9 from a seizure. Danny inspired Linda to ensure that the lives of adults and adolescents with autism would be lived to their fullest potential. Although Linda takes pride that the foundation is run by volunteers, it is she who runs all events, manages the Web site, and does much of the fund raising and advocacy herself. The foundation develops and awards grants to residential, recreational, vocational, educational and family programs in the state and throughout the country as a continuing legacy for Danny.

For nearly 10 years **Jim Gilligan of West Milford** has made an impact on the lives of thousands of people he does not know. As the developer and coordinator of a monthly blood drive in his hometown, he has been responsible for collecting 8,325 units of blood and platelet donations. In West Milford he is known as "Jim the Blood Guy." With enthusiasm and dedication, Gilligan has nearly single-handedly developed and maintained the monthly blood drive, drawing together community groups, schools and faith-based groups and soliciting businesses to donate recognition gifts for his donors. To put his efforts into perspective, most community groups that organize blood drives conduct one to four each year and average 25 to 35 donations per drive.

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Gilligan organizes 12 (and has done so for 10 years) and he has averaged 80 units of blood per month for the past three years.

**Jane Hanson** of **Montclair** wants to improve the lives of women struggling to escape abuse and secure a safe future for themselves and their children. She left a corporate law job at Prudential to start Partners for Women and Justice, a non-profit organization that provides free legal services to low-income and abused women who are dealing with domestic violence and family law issues. In the beginning, 2002, Hanson did everything from answering the phones to assisting clients to managing computers and designing databases. She recruited family lawyers to donate time and young lawyers willing to be trained pro bono. By 2005 she secured several grants, hired staff and expanded the board of trustees. Partners for Women and Justice now serves approximately 400 women each year and provides legal representation, legal clinics, telephone help lines, a financial literacy program and the preparation of wills and other legal documents.

**Mary Hirschman** of **Ridgefield Park** was nominated by her granddaughter, Sara Weston, who wrote, “No one has instilled in me the importance of service quite like my family, particularly my grandmother.” She credits her grandmother with not just telling her to do community service, but showing her through example. Hirschman buys food for the local soup kitchen, leads fund raising bus trips to Atlantic City, supports programs at the Bright Side Senior Center and makes donations to a homeless shelter in Hackensack. She also serves on boards of organizations, drives people to the hospital if they can’t find a ride and refuses to hear the word “No.” For the woman whom Sara calls social worker, advocate and fund raiser, the community is her office. Sara describes her grandmother as a selfless leader, who, at 89, does this work because “it is the right thing to do.”

**Veronice Horne** of **Newark** is described by her award nominator as one who “exudes love and encouragement and has persevered in overcoming obstacles in her personal and professional life. She has the ability to influence others to become involved in community service through her sincerity and commitment.” Horne, who was homeless and lived on the street for 10 years, began her transformation through the Goodwill Rescue Mission, a group of churchwomen who helped those in need. She used her own money to distribute food and clothing from the trunk of her car. She went on to establish In the Hands of a Woman Ministry to assist the homeless, those with addiction and victims of abuse. The organization offers a “hand up” rather than a hand out. She would like to establish a Hands Up Home for women. Horne believes in restoring her clients to a life of independence.

**Yusef Ismail** of **Newark** is executive director of Stop Shootin’ Inc. He uses his boundless passion to end gun violence in urban communities nationwide. Growing up in Newark’s Baxter Terrace Housing projects, Ismail embraced a life of crime, unaware of the impact that drugs and violence had on him. After completing a two-year prison term

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for drug dealing, surviving a near fatal shooting and witnessing his best friend's mother gunned down by stray bullets, he made a life-altering decision to become an entrepreneur. He and two friends co-founded Stop Shootin' to promote programs and events that provide youth with educational, cultural and economic alternatives to criminal activity. With money received through federal and private grants, Yusef, his colleagues and volunteers tell youth "Stop Shootin', Start Thinkin', Keep Livin'." They accomplish their goals through mentoring, sponsoring workshops on conflict resolution, providing social skills training and hosting an after school basketball program that includes sessions on peer leadership and violence prevention.

Twenty-four-year old **Daniela Mendelsohn** of **Englewood** had a vision. She wanted to create a foundation that would utilize the creative and performing arts to help children suffering from chronic and life threatening illnesses. She knew the arts could be a critical coping tool to provide emotional support. She experienced this first hand when her 15-year-old cousin died from bone cancer. Mendelsohn's cousin became her inspiration to create ArtWorks, The Naomi Cohain Foundation. Twenty-two medical centers in the New Jersey and New York area participate in ArtWorks Express Yourself events. At these events, children and young adults, ages 4 through 24, submit artwork for display. There is also a performing arts segment. The events, held semiannually, celebrate life and give each child a moment to shine and not be defined by their disease.

**Lodi** resident **Eugene McVeigh** is retired and has volunteered at the Paramus Veterans Home every day since it opened in 1986. He volunteers seven days a week for four hours a day at the residence. It is estimated that the 92-year-old, a veteran of World War II and a former Army combat medic, has spent 25,000 hours at the home. He calls Bingo games, organizes trips, secures donations and socializes with the veterans. The VA home has more than 300 residents, many of whom are amputees, elderly, wheelchair-bound and in need of company and assistance. He has dedicated his life to serving his country and to helping other veterans.

**Angelica Mercado** of **North Bergen** was nominated because of her courage, presence of mind, intelligence, modesty and humility. Last November, when Mercado was driving on the New Jersey Turnpike to her 3 to 11 p.m. shift at Holy Name Hospital, where she is a patient care technician and unit secretary in the Pulmonary Unit, she came upon a gasoline tanker that had flipped over and exploded. The driver, engulfed in flames, was dazed and walking near his truck. Mercado pulled her car off the road and ran to him. She screamed for him to drop to the ground. When he didn't, she pushed him to the ground and smothered the flames with her coat. The accident scene became unbearably hot and she heard sounds that indicated the tanker might explode again. Not waiting for emergency responders, Mercado and another woman lifted the driver and placed him in her car. She asked directions to the closest emergency room and drove to The University Hospital in Newark where the driver was diagnosed with second- and third-degree burns over 40 percent of his body. Healthcare professionals there believe that Mercado's quick actions likely saved the man's life.

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**Bea Napier**, of the **Township of Washington**, has a black belt in karate and teaches self-defense to women and children at the Padre Pio homeless shelter in the Bronx where she has volunteered weekly for the past 18 years. However, it is for her service with the Township of Washington Ambulance Corp that she was nominated. In her more than 35 years of service she has made more than 5,000 calls, used CPR to save 19 lives and assisted with three childbirths. Her enthusiasm remains as fresh as it was her first call. Napier is saving lives, providing comfort and setting an example for others to follow.

**Mackenzie Olson** of **Mantua** believes “the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” The 11-year-old founded Crowns for a Cause, bringing together past and present pageant titleholders, their families and friends to provide community service. They’ve assisted senior citizens, cancer patients and impoverished mothers who needed pampering. A Tennessee chapter of Crowns for a Cause was started by a woman there who loved the concept. In addition, Olson has testified before the New Jersey Commission on Bullying in Schools about a program she created, “The Bullying Stops Here.” Olson stated, “Even if it’s one person at a time, I can change the world.

A cancer coach can be an uplifting advocate for someone diagnosed with the disease. **Sharon Lee Parker** of **Hackensack**, founder of the Life Lover Foundation, decided to become a cancer coach to help those with a cancer diagnosis after she was misdiagnosed and learned she had two unrelated cancers plus a benign brain tumor. The oncologist who provided treatment in Houston, Dr. Andre Goy, noticed that Parker related to patients in the waiting room and helped them feel more at ease and positive about navigating the uncharted waters of the cancer experience. Her attitude was contagious and soon people were referred to her and calling for coping strategies. Parker has coached 856 individuals and their families through onset and treatment. With the profits from her book, “*Look Out Cancer Here I Come*,” she established the Life Lover Foundation to support cancer research.

Attorney **Loryn Raggiola** of **Paterson** has always felt that service is important. She believes people should never have shame about needing something because it’s an opportunity for someone else to give something. She noticed that the church across the street from her office provided food for the homeless every day except Monday. She started an organization, Give Back, to fill the gap and to involve colleagues at her law firm. She began in the winter of 2003, and what she thought would be a short-term outreach is ongoing. “You can’t offer something like that and then take it away,” she said. When she launched Give Back she and her colleague fed between five and 10 people each Monday. Now there are 50 to 60 who look forward to the Monday meal. She’s also learned that not all of them are homeless. There are also day laborers that live on a limited income and another who subsists on a very small pension.

Since 1990, **Barry Rochester** of **Paterson** has been committed to keeping black students enrolled in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. In 1989 he recognized a decrease in the number of black students at the New Jersey Institute of

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Technology. He and a colleague met with the president of the school to discuss a solution. The discussions led to the creation of the Black Engineering and Technology Alumni Association. Each year, the program brings 10 deserving freshmen into NJIT and engages them during their college years. Rochester, an engineer, has been involved as a facilitator, mentor and moderator for 19 years. He continues to motivate students to further their science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills to make them viable for future employment. He also holds them accountable for community activism by involving them in the Alumni Association.

**Kevin J. Williams** of **Maywood** established the Maywood Rotary Kenya Project. Its roots are in a 2003 visit Williams, his partner and three adopted children made to Kenya to help the children understand their heritage. There, they visited an elementary school on a reservation for members of the Maasai tribe. Williams' eight-year-old son was deeply disturbed by the conditions at the school. Back in Maywood, Williams began Maywood Rotary Kenya Project and worked to get donations to change the world for these Maasai children. He went person-to-person, to schools, churches and community groups to raise funds to build the first fresh water well for the schoolchildren and people in seven surrounding villages. His success has allowed the children to have a well-balanced meal each day, school supplies and textbooks, a library and school uniforms. Each year Williams leads volunteers who pay their own way to make improvements at the school. He was distressed to learn that the students don't attend high school because they can't afford the \$2,500 cost. He worked harder to get donations and has sent two entire eighth grade classes to high school. His ultimate goal is to get other New Jersey groups to adopt Maasai schools.

**Baye Wilson** of **Montclair**, a lawyer, developer and community organizer, wanted to restore Newark's blighted Lincoln Park neighborhood into a safe, attractive community. In 2006, he decided to create an urban eco-village that would include affordable, sustainable housing, arts and cultural programming, green collar job training and green jobs. He established The Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District to accomplish his goal. The development corporation has built six housing units and plans to build seven more. The homes, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified, are the first green homes in Newark. The corporation's GreenCAP program will sponsor 100 trade licenses for Newark residents in plumbing, electrical and HVAC systems. The developer is hopeful that by 2010, the project will have created 200 jobs in Lincoln Park.

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