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

State Residents to be Honored for Giving Back to Their Communities

(MAHWAH, NJ) - Ceremonies to present the 2011 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference and honor Garden State residents for their unselfish dedication to serving others will take place Tuesday, May 3 at Ramapo College of New Jersey. The Honorable Cory Booker, mayor of Newark, NJ, will be the ceremony's keynote speaker.

Among the finalists are a high school student who raised more than \$170,000 in cash and labor for Homes For Our Troops, a program that builds specially adapted homes for severely injured veterans at no cost to them; a man who ran into a burning building to rescue three people; a doctor who left her medical practice to create a community center for Korean senior citizens and a woman who built a home for teen mothers and pregnant teens.

The top three finalists, chosen by a committee comprised of 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 \$5,000.

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 is designated a special 15 year commemoration of the event and a recognition of all the wonderful community service performed by honorees. This year's finalists include:

Hernan Agudelo of **Union** became a hero, putting himself in danger, to help two assault victims this past January after he heard a commotion in his neighbor's backyard. He went to investigate and observed an assailant attacking his two female neighbors with a knife and an axe. Without hesitation he ran to his car and returned with a small baseball bat. He struck the assailant with the bat and was able to stop the vicious attack. The assailant turned his rage to Agudelo, who suffered lacerations to his ear and neck. His neighbors, who were in critical condition, are still recovering. The Union police director who nominated Agudelo said, "There is no doubt that if Mr. Agudelo did not intervene, this incident would have resulted in a double homicide."

Dean Brauch of **North Haledon** was dubbed a mystery man. On his way to work one morning, he saw a Fair Lawn building ablaze. He dashed inside to help three people, including one in a wheelchair, to safety. Brauch, a former volunteer fire fighter, helped Fair Lawn emergency officials who arrived at the scene. Then he vanished! Brauch's daughter learned of her father's heroic act in a Facebook status posted by her mother. She knew her father was too humble to make a fuss about his actions. She sent an e-mail to the Fair Lawn police department, and wrote, "He should be recognized as a hero, because that's my dad." His daughter marvels that he could have just as easily dialed 911 and driven away. Brauch's explanation for leaving the scene? He had to get to work.

Catherine Carisi of **Lodi** began working with disabled children when she was 17. The experience ignited a passion in her. With two friends she formed the non-profit organization Camp Acorn in 2001. Camp Acorn is a summer/winter social and recreational program for children and young adults with multiple disabilities. It offers a therapeutic and instructional program that develops fine and gross motor skills while building confidence and self-esteem. Activities are adapted to the needs of each camper. Carisi's mission is to give individuals with special needs experiences they are denied elsewhere. Camp Acorn started with a \$1,200 budget; now the yearly budget exceeds \$250,000. The camp offers a nine-week summer camp, a Saturday program and monthly dances during the school year. Carisi has been described as fearless and one who challenges the limited notions about what those with special needs can achieve. For the campers and volunteers of Camp Acorn, she is a teacher, mentor, friend and mother.

Jane Geoghegan of **Toms River**, and her family, were nominated for their collective years of service with the Silverton First Aid Squad. Three generations, spanning 47 years, have selflessly contributed time and talent, and have made a meaningful contribution to the community. Husband Jerry founded the Silverton First Aid Squad in 1964 and served as president until his recent death. Geoghegan, a retired nurse and paramedic, serves as captain of the squad. At one point, three of the Geoghegan's children served. Now, a grandchild has hopped on board. Geoghegan enjoys helping others. While she muses about the serious calls she responds to, she also has experienced joy and has delivered three. Days can get busy. For instance, an on duty squad may respond to 10 calls in a five hour period. Silverton's current president said that Geoghegan averages hundreds of responses each year and can be found at the first aid building almost seven days a week. Last year, the Township of Toms River passed a resolution thanking Jane Geoghegan for her outstanding humanitarian efforts.

Since 2003 **Jane Fiedler** of **Teaneck** has served as executive director of Zoe's Place, an agency that provides a home and necessary services for homeless teen mothers and their babies. Fiedler gained experience as a program director for Parent Aides for Teens, a mentoring program at the Volunteer Center of Bergen County and worked with victims of rape at the Rape Crisis Center. Her approach is to care for the girls and not be judgmental. She saw a need for a group home for teen mothers and rallied several

dedicated women to work toward fulfilling her goal. A ribbon cutting ceremony for the home will be held May 9 and will provide housing for five teen moms and their babies and pregnant teens. Fiedler also opened Zoe's Cupcake Café two years ago to provide employment and training opportunities for the teens to learn food preparation, sales, marketing, bookkeeping and customer service. Profits from the café provide a source of sustainable funding for the home. Fiedler receives no salary as executive director and allows herself a minimal salary from the café. She has a passion to help others and lavishes praise on them, never accepting praise for her own accomplishments.

Kristin Kosch of **Mahwah** began volunteering as a high school freshman, following her brother's lead and working with Homes For Our Troops, a program that builds specially adapted homes for severely injured veterans at no cost to them. The following year, when Kristen's brother went to college, she took over the program. She spends countless hours each week on the phone networking, recruiting schools, soliciting funds and raising awareness about the program. Motivated and goal oriented, Kristen set school involvement and fund raising benchmarks. During the past three years, she has expanded the program to 45 school districts and has raised more than \$170,000 in cash, labor and materials. She was able to see firsthand how her efforts changed the life of a wounded veteran when the funds she raised were used to defray the costs of an elevator, a lift to assist the veteran in and out of bed, the expansion of doorways and the remodeling of his bathroom and shower.

Dr. Kye-Eun Ma of **Englewood** left her medical practice to establish the Friends of Grace Seniors (FGS) Korean Community Center in Englewood. It was founded in 2001 as a place for immigrant first generation Korean seniors to gather and participate in social, health and cultural activities to promote healthy and independent living. The goal was to prevent the seniors from living their later years in an isolated environment disconnected from the community. In addition to socialization, FGS provides primary and preventive health care to poor, uninsured Korean-American immigrants. The center has more than 100 classes and activities and approximately 10,000 people use it each year. In addition, the center offers programs to children such as piano instruction and ballet classes. There are 50 volunteers who help a small staff run the center. FGS strives to create programs that connect intergenerations of people. Dr. Ma, who serves as president, believes that everyone has something to offer if they are just given the chance. The chance awaits them at FGS.

Shannon McNamara of **Basking Ridge** established SHARE, Shannon's After-school Reading Exchange, almost three years ago when she was 15 years old. The program aims to empower girls in Africa through education. While preparing for a family service trip to Africa, Shannon learned about the lack of books and the cultural bias that discourages literacy among girls. Not only did she think this was unfair, but she arrived in Tanzania with 500 pounds of books and supplies that she collected from neighbors. She transformed a dilapidated schoolroom into a library. She started a reading program to teach English to the girls. SHARE's motto: Today a reader, tomorrow a leader! Through Shannon's efforts, which include promoting youth involvement in New Jersey, book drives and fund raising events to pay for shipping and yearly trips to Tanzania, she

has enlisted the help of 850 youth and set up four school libraries that house more than 23,000 books. Poised and knowledgeable, she's been interviewed on national television, recognized by the United Nations and speaks regularly to groups in New Jersey.

Gary Oppenheimer of **Newfoundland** is the founder and executive director of AmpleHarvest.org. A home gardener and director of a community garden, he searched for a food pantry to donate excess produce. An Internet search indicated the closest was 25 miles away, even though Oppenheimer knew there were several in his hometown. He realized that if he had trouble finding a pantry, so would those in need of the services pantries offer. Oppenheimer created an easy-to-use, free way to connect gardeners to hungry families through AmpleHarvest.org. More than 3,000 pantries have registered online and tens of thousands of pounds of fresh produce have been delivered to food pantries across the nation. Without drawing a salary, he has created a network of support and has changed the way food pantries serve their clients. "To do the impossible, you must first believe it isn't" is one of his favorite sayings.

Gail Dunlap Reuben of **Convent Station**, an audiologist, and **Laura McKirdy** of **Far Hills**, a speech and language pathologist, are co-founders of The Lake Drive Programs for Children Who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. It is a school they created to demonstrate their passion to change lives and institute high academic standards for students with hearing loss. The school, the first non-residential one for deaf children in the state, offers a comprehensive continuum of educational opportunities for children with hearing loss from birth to high school graduation. One-hundred-and-eight students from 11 counties, 60 infants and toddlers and more than 30 school districts with mainstreamed hearing impaired students depend on Lake Drive for support services. Earlier in their careers, Reuben and McKirdy fitted deaf babies with hearing aids and taught them to listen, talk and communicate. At Lake Drive, there is a state-of-the-art audiology department, an award-winning speech and language program, a proactive mental health program and practical skills of daily living program. Through The Lake Drive Foundation, two pilot programs, Precious Years and Ivy Nursery, show promise for expansion in the state. Their vision has enabled thousands of hearing impaired children fulfill their potential, earn scholarships, attend college and lead successful, independent lives.

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