



**RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY**  
**Office of Communications and Public Relations**

**Press Release**

**May 1, 2015**

*Contact: Stephen J. Hudik*

*E-mail: shudik@ramapo.edu*

*Phone: 201-684-7845*

## **Ten Individuals Honored at 2015 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference Ceremony at Ramapo College**

MAHWAH, N.J. -- Unsung heroes from throughout New Jersey earned recognition for their compassion and concern for others as part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference ceremony at Ramapo College on May 1.

The top honoree received a cash prize of \$50,000; the second place honoree received \$35,000 and the third place honoree received \$25,000. Seven awards with a \$5,000 cash prize each were also announced. Established in 1997 by the late Russell Berrie and managed and hosted by Ramapo College of New Jersey, the Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference honors Garden State residents whose outstanding community service and charitable contributions made a substantial impact on the lives of others.

Gary Oppenheimer, founder and executive director of AmpleHarvest.org Inc., an organization that aims to reduce hunger and malnutrition in America, served as the keynote speaker. Oppenheimer established AmpleHarvest to encourage home gardeners to share their excess harvest with the needy in their respective communities.

### ***About the 2015 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference Honorees***

- **Dominique Lee of Newark** has been awarded the \$50,000 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference for his passion as a teacher and his innovative spirit and perseverance in helping school children overcome poverty and inadequate educational resources. When Lee arrived in 2007 at Malcolm X. Shabazz High School in Newark as a Teach for America recruit, he was dismayed at the number of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who were reading below a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. In an effort to remedy a system that produced such abysmal statistics, Dominique enlisted help from fellow Teach For America alumni to create a school management nonprofit, BRICK -- *Building Responsible Intelligent Creative Kids*. BRICK's focus was to infuse best practices learned from district and charter schools and to address the elements of poverty impeding academic excellence. Through Dominique's efforts, BRICK was placed at two schools in the South Ward of Newark, both of which were in the bottom two percent of elementary schools in the state. Since the launch of BRICK, those teacher-run schools are now growing. The students are thriving

in the classroom. The collaboration with other district schools and the success of BRICK led to the creation of the South Ward Children's Alliance, which brings needed resources, including health and social services, and innovation to the children and families in the South Ward.

- When **Linda Gillick** was told that her three-month-old son had cancer, the **Toms River** resident was determined to find answers. That was 35 years ago. Since then, Linda embarked on a crusade that would make a huge impact on the community and attract national attention. As more and more children from the Toms River area faced cancer diagnoses, Linda pushed to get state health officials to look into environmental causes for the unusually high cancer incidence. This got the attention of journalists and investigators who confirmed illegal dumping of chemicals into the local water waterways. Linda's tireless efforts led to funding of research and forced cleanup of several sites in the area. She is the founder and executive director of Ocean of Love, an organization that provides much needed support, information and care to the local families that are struggling with the disease. The Ocean County nonprofit has served more than 450 families since its 1988 inception. Linda's son Michael has defied the odds but still is hounded by cancer's aftereffects, which inspired Linda to author *For the Love of Mike*, and was chronicled in the book *Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation*. Linda's work is truly incredible in that she not only attacked her own problem, but proactively attempted to solve the environmental clean-up and helped others outside her family who were suffering. For aiding her local community in a multi-faceted way, she is the recipient of the \$35,000 award.

**Anthony Bevivino**, of **Villas**, the recipient of the \$25,000 Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference, prefers to work behind the scenes and under the radar. However, his efforts speak volumes to the many people who have been on the receiving end of his dedication and resourcefulness. Anthony, a former science teacher and bed-and-breakfast owner in Cape May County, realized that all the B&Bs were disposing their linens at the end of the season. He was sure that those items could be put to use by people in the community who were in need. He gathered the linens himself and delivered them to individuals and agencies. That single act of kindness so many years ago kick-started a community-wide effort to provide blankets, clothing and other essential items, including baby furniture, store gift cards and monetary offerings to homeless shelters, veterans' organizations, victims of domestic violence and church food pantries, among others, throughout Cape May County. In the past three years alone, Anthony has collected and distributed more than 3,800 coats to adults and children. More than 25 organizations and countless individuals have received assistance from Tony and his volunteers.

- **Paige Alenick**, 19, of **Woodcliff Lake** was just seven years-old when she began her commitment to helping those in need. She became one of the youngest volunteers in Bergen County when she joined *JOY* (Joining Young & Old), a Demarest school chorus that sings songs from the 1940s at concerts for the elderly in local assisted living facilities. In 2011, Paige founded Donate-A-Toothbrush, a program that collects new toothbrushes to help individuals combat oral health issues and disease. To date, she has collected and distributed worldwide approximately 150,000 toothbrushes. Her work has inspired Scout troops, houses of worship, students and government officials to join the cause. The more than 30,000 toothbrushes collected in New Jersey have gone to domestic violence shelters, food pantries, Rutgers Dental School and the KinderSmile Foundation in Montclair, among others.

- **Eileen Griffith of Chester** is being honored for her tireless efforts on behalf of thousands of needy veterans, aging-out youth and adults with mental illness. In the late 1970s, Eileen began advocating for the more humane and effective treatment of patients in psychiatric institutions. She spent decades as a volunteer on the court-appointed committee monitoring patient care and living conditions at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital. In 1985, Eileen tackled another issue: patients disabled by mental illness who were released from local and state psychiatric hospitals into the community who had few if any support systems in the community. She, along with mental health professionals and family members of patients, established Community Hope, which is now one of the largest providers of supportive housing for people with mental illness in New Jersey. In 2000, the needs of homeless veterans were also addressed. The wife of a Korean veteran, she understood troops must be supported both in the battlefield and after they return home. The result was the development of the largest transitional housing program for homeless veterans in New Jersey. With more than 40 residences, Community Hope helps hundreds of individuals every day to continue their recovery in residential programs. This year, Community Hope expects to “save” an estimated 1,300 individuals from homelessness, poverty and despair through their programs. Her tireless efforts have restored hope and dignity to these individuals and their families.

- **Tom Cash of Short Hills** began making a difference in the lives of New Jersey youth in 1987 when he personally funded scholarships for eight students to attend private high schools near their homes in Jersey City. Tom was so persuasive about the impact that scholarships and mentoring could have on the urban poor that his friends, as well as many others, joined in his efforts to help as many inner-city students as possible. In 1993, Tom founded Student/Partner Alliance (SPA), a non-profit organization focused on this mission. SPA currently supports more than 150 students each year with nearly 100 percent of them going on to college, a key step toward assuring their responsible contribution to society and engaged and employed adults. Tom’s personal commitment to helping the inner-city poor has made a significant impact on the lives of more than 1,500 teenagers with a combination of financial support and mentoring while inspiring and motivating many others to help deserving students.

- **Evangelia “Poppy” Davis of Cherry Hill** spends her Fridays as a volunteer in the local Camden County Red Cross office. The 92-year-old has been doing so for the last 55 years. Her day, which typically goes from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., includes registering blood donors and running the canteen to ensure the donors have enough to eat and drink. Poppy said she joined the Red Cross in 1960 because she wanted to help with blood drives. Poppy is a native of Eritrea, a country on the horn of Africa. She came to America in 1945 after marrying her America career soldier husband. They settled in New Jersey after tours in Germany and South Korea. She spends the summer in New Hampshire and volunteers there too. Poppy believes “When you commit yourself, you commit yourself.”

- When **Dora E. Arias of Mountainside** was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003, she, like many other patients, was overwhelmed with fear and uncertainty. She underwent treatment and after battling the disease, established a nonprofit organization, *Curémonos*, which focuses on helping underserved and

uninsured women affected by the disease. *Curémonos*, which means “healing together,” provides education, advocacy, patient navigation services and interpretation services to uninsured women, especially Latinas, who otherwise have no means of obtaining information after diagnosis. Dora has traveled to Washington, D.C., to speak before Congress about issues affecting diagnosis and treatment of women with breast cancer. She was chosen as a Ford “Model of Courage” in 2013 for the motor company’s “Warriors in Pink” program.

- **Brian Meersma of Princeton Junction** struggled through school, unable to learn to read because of dyslexia. He ultimately found success using text-to-speech technologies. Now in college, Brian wanted to make sure other young people do not struggle needlessly. He created a blog that has become a go-to resource to assist with reading difficulties. Leading organizations, including the Yale Center for Dyslexia, refer to his work. Brian’s blog has more than one million page views and nearly 1,000 followers. He has led interactive workshops in schools and libraries and developed a summer reading program for struggling readers. He meets weekly with a group of students to teach them how to use various technological tools to help them turn reading into a pleasurable experience. He is a sought after presenter and consultant. Brian has become a role model, acknowledging his own difficulties, showing students that they are neither dumb nor alone. He has taken his own difference and made a difference.

- **Anne Ciavaglia McMahon of Hasbrouck Heights** enjoyed a 27-year career in the field of human services in the public, private and non-profit sector. Her success was never impeded by the fact that she was born with a progressive degenerating muscle disease, spinal muscular atrophy. She is a lifetime volunteer of the Muscular Dystrophy Association, member of the Hasbrouck Heights Community Access for All Committee and a former Board of Trustee member of Heightened Independence and Progress. After retiring in 2007, she launched *Our New Journey*, a unique project to support people with disabilities and their families. Services are provided by individuals who have first-hand experience as caregivers, as well as by those who receive care. Services include providing limited financial support for direct care services, guidance in understanding personal needs, help with locating available services and caregiver peer-to-peer support. To date, *Our New Journey* has helped more than 900 families. Her husband Brendan accepted the award on her behalf.

###

Ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as sixth in the Best Regional Universities North category, Ramapo College of New Jersey is sometimes mistaken for a private college. This is, in part, due to its unique interdisciplinary academic structure, its size of approximately 6,000 students and its pastoral setting in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains on the New Jersey/New York border.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include nursing and social work. In addition, Ramapo College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels. The College also offers eight graduate programs as well as articulated programs with Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New York Chiropractic College, New York University College of Dentistry, SUNY State College of Optometry and New York College of Podiatric Medicine.