



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
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Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Celebrates Honorees at 21st Annual 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 21st Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award ceremony at Ramapo College on May 5.

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. Eight 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 Making a Difference Award honors Garden State residents whose outstanding community service and charitable contributions made a substantial impact on the lives of others.

About the 2017 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Honorees

BONNIE O'BRIEN of **PARAMUS** has been awarded the \$50,000 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award for her passion to improve the lives of individuals transitioning from incarceration back into society. In the mid-1990s, Bonnie, a human resources professional, was asked to conduct employment/career training at the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack. It was a stark introduction to the reality of recidivism: approximately two-thirds of people released from jail or prison are re-arrested within three years, evidence of a dire need for programs to help those people make a successful journey back into society. As she continued to volunteer at the jail, she worked tirelessly to establish contacts with community leaders, members of law enforcement, the court system, state colleges and universities, local businesses and area not-for-profit organizations in the hopes of promoting and advancing re-entry services. After exhaustive efforts, Bonnie purchased in 2013 a building in Hackensack with her personal funds, and launched Transition Professionals, a collaboration of volunteers with various professional backgrounds, including psychologists, employment specialists, paralegals, not-for-profit professionals, attorneys, licensed social workers, armed services veterans, individuals from faith-based organizations and even ex-offenders. Since its inception and with Bonnie as its executive director, Transition Professionals has served hundreds of individuals pre- and post-release from incarceration, making a difference in the lives of those who have been long underserved but yet deserve another chance.

Losing a child to suicide is unimaginable for any parent. Yet, **KURT AND TRICIA BAKER** have dedicated their lives to helping children, teens and young adults avoid struggling with mental health disorders in silence and eliminating the stigma that leads to that silence and, in many cases, a feeling of hopelessness and suicide. The **PRINCETON** couple established Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR™) in 2010, shortly after their son Kenny took his own life after a long battle with severe depression and anxiety. The Bakers are the winners of the \$35,000 award. Since 2011, AIR has delivered its interactive educational presentation to more than 50,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges, primarily throughout New Jersey and several other states. This program, Coming Up for AIR™ is effective by helping young people feel comfortable discussing these difficult topics. The Bakers often bring therapy dogs with them to their presentations, giving students a sense of belonging and comfort. Another impactful component of the program is the IN THEIR SHOES™ exhibit, consisting of 265 pairs of shoes that represent the number of 10- to 24-years-old New Jersey residents who took their own lives over the past several years. The shoes have tags with statements representing thoughts youth have when they experience emotional or mental difficulties.

BRENDA ANTINORE knows what desperation feels like. In the late 1990s, the **CAMDEN** woman and her husband were caught in a vicious cycle of drug addiction that nearly destroyed their lives. It was a life-altering experience, to say the least. In time, however, the Antinores rebuilt their family and founded the non-profit Seeds of Hope and She Has A Name (SHAN) ministry, which provides a clean, safe place for women who roam the streets of Camden. Brenda opens her home, offering meals, showers and hygiene products and provides a place where these women can share their burdens and receive, in turn, encouragement and support 24/7. Several years ago, Brenda reached out to the Camden police in the hopes that they would offer these women an opportunity to get help and enter recovery programs in lieu of arrest. Over the years Brenda has developed relationships with recovery programs throughout the tri-state area. When a woman makes the decision to leave street life, Brenda gets to work finding an appropriate recovery program, and often drives the woman there herself. She says she can't make them take help, but her persistence and caring continues to turn around the lives of many young women who felt they had no other choices. For her dedication and caring, Brenda is the recipient of the \$25,000 award.

Cash awards of \$5,000 were presented to:

JOSEPH BROWN of **GALLOWAY** was just 23 years old when his life changed forever. While serving his country overseas, an accident left him paralyzed—he had no use of his legs and limited use of his upper body. But instead of being a person who had things done for him, he became someone who has spent his life doing for others. In 1972, he was one of a handful of volunteers who helped bring the Special Olympics to New Jersey. Those volunteers organized the first events for 300 youngsters. That effort has grown to 30,000 athletes who participate in year-round scheduled events. In 1977 when the Atlantic County government sought guidance on how to better serve the disabled population, Joe was selected to the Advisory Board. Forty years later, he is still greatly active, serving as a delegate to the White House Committee for the Employment of the Handicapped and to the Statue of Liberty Renovation Project as well as many other organizations for the physically challenged.

MARLENE CERAGNO of **TENAFLY**, was a nursery school teacher for 15 years, caring for little ones and helping to prepare them for life ahead. One summer, she spent time with senior adults at the local community center and found her new calling with a population-- generations apart from her full-time charges. It was then she decided to make a drastic career change and she pursued a master's degree in gerontology. At the same time, she began caring for an aunt who was suffering with dementia, paying her bills and taking care of other finances. What shocked Marlene most was the often unaffordable price of much-needed items, in particular adult incontinence products. She learned that many seniors on fixed incomes often went without these products, which greatly limited their ability to go out in public and be active. To ease the financial burden of paying for such items, and reduce the isolation many seniors experience, she established the first Adult Care Brief Bank. She has reached out to many volunteer and faith-based organizations who have hosted collection drives, while other organizations have taken on the responsibility of distributing these items directly to those in need. To date, more than 100,000 adult briefs have been collected and distributed to low-income seniors throughout New Jersey and beyond.

Troubled by the seemingly endless environment drugs and violence surrounding his neighborhood, **GILMAN CHOUDHURY** of **PATERSON** felt compelled to do something. He volunteered at his alma mater JFK High School because, in his words, if people didn't get active, then the city we live in would fall deeper into decay." He was a freshman at Montclair State University at the time, but still found time to mentor students at JFK with the robotics team, and did this for four years until he finished college. After graduation, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves, got a job with the Department of Family & Community Engagement at Paterson Public Schools and still found time to volunteer at JFK in the after-school and evening programs. He encouraged students to become involved in their community and become volunteers themselves. Gilman's mission is to advocate for young people by connecting them with enrichment programs, such as Upward Bound and SAT programs, that will build their resumes and lead them to employment opportunities that might have otherwise been out of reach. To the students he works with, he is a tough but caring mentor as well as a friend.

KATELYN DARROW of **PITMAN** understood at a very young age the powerful impact of a helping hand. As a child, Katelyn, her sisters and her mother had to flee an abusive situation with just the clothes on their backs. A few years later, a house fire destroyed most of their possessions. In 2009, at just 12 years old, Katelyn founded Angels of God Clothing Closet, out of a desire to help families in need as her own family had been helped through those hard times. Angels of God provides clothing and other necessities such as toiletries and food items to families who have experienced domestic abuse or other crises. Katelyn has partnered with local churches, agencies and shelters to accept donations and create a referral system so that families can come and "shop" at Angels of God free of cost. She has also created other services to complement the clothing closet, including Angels Pet Food Pantry and Bless This Prom Dress Drive. Katelyn has assisted more than 30,000 families since 2009.

DANIELLE GLETOW's own experience was the inspiration for One Simple Wish, a wish-granting non-profit for children who have been in and out of foster care. She and her husband were themselves foster parents so they recognized first-hand the importance of creating sense of normalcy for children in foster care. They vividly remember their first foster child arriving to their home in a coat several sizes too big,

with few other possessions to his name. The **EWING** woman developed One Simple Wish's website where people can go to donate everyday necessities and specific items to make life a little more pleasant for those children in need. Since 2008, the organization has successfully helped grant more than 12,500 wishes. One Simple Wish makes giving easy and meaningful for the donor while showing young people that someone cares.

First Friends of NY & NJ is an organization that provides compassion and hope through volunteer visitation to people in immigration detention, offering resettlement assistance and advocacy. **LORNA HENKEL** of **SECAUCUS**, a lifelong activist for social justice, joined the volunteer group and now serves as its president of the board of trustees. Since 2008 she has visited dozens of detained persons, speaking on a phone mostly through a plexiglass barrier. Their cases often take years to move through the immigration court system but First Friends offers hope and help during the process, and providing post-release assistance for these people who often need clothing, money, transportation and temporary housing while they find a place to live. Many former detainees have had their first post-release meal at Lorna's home. Lorna and her husband also have worked with a local congregation to help released detainees with language skills, work opportunities and independent living.

KIERSTEN MILES of **WALL** is a student at Towson University in Maryland. Last summer, she was hired as a nanny for a family who lives close to her hometown. What she didn't know before meeting the family was that their nine-month-old daughter Talia had a serious liver condition. If the little girl didn't receive a transplant, she would likely not reach her second birthday. After just three weeks working for the family, Kiersten decided to get tested to see if she was a compatible match for Talia. Once doctors confirmed that she was, Kiersten donated a portion of her liver. The procedure was done at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia this past January and both Kiersten and baby Talia are doing well. Talia will need anti-rejection drugs for the rest of her life but will be able to lead a more normal life. Kiersten spent a week in the hospital and has a five-inch scar, which she says is just "a small sacrifice when you compare it to saving a life." Kiersten's totally selfless act truly made a difference in the deepest sense of the word.

CHARLES VALENTINE of **NORTH ARLINGTON** believed that true recovery from addiction goes well beyond ceasing to abuse alcohol and drugs; just as important is a successful re-entry into society and reunification with family and loved ones. Working with established treatment programs, Charles opened a transitional home in 2010 in Montclair. The Valentine House became home to nine men in recovery who committed to turning their lives around for the better. Two years later, he opened a home for women in Lyndhurst and another home for men in 2015 in Bloomingdale and to date has five homes that have served 175 residents. Right now, Valentine House reports a 68 percent recovery rate, and Charles hopes to continue to open homes.

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Ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top in the Best Regional Public Universities North category, Ramapo College of New Jersey is sometimes viewed as 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.