



**RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY**  
**Office of Marketing and Communications**  
**Press Release**  
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## **Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Celebrates Honorees at 22nd 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 22nd Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award ceremony at Ramapo College on May 4.

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 2018 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award Honorees***

In 2004, **PINO RODRIGUEZ**, a resident of the Lanning Square West neighborhood of **CAMDEN** (Camden County), took a chance on something he believed could truly transform his block and provide a better quality of life for his children. Recalling “gunshots every hour on the hour” and “ducking down on the ground” with his kids, he searched for a solution to the crime, blight, and injustice his family experienced daily. The answer was to create shared pride, respect, responsibility, and accountability on his block – to involve and empower everyone to keep it clean and beautiful and to deter crime indirectly by making the neighborhood a better place to live. People who joined him were known as Block Supporters, and his concept grew into a program known as the Block Supporter Initiative (BSI). Through BSI, he and his neighbors transformed their tough, violent block into a beautiful, safe place to raise a family and call “home.” Relying only on volunteer efforts and with no funding, Pino’s block remained free of violent crime for 11 years. In 2015, his volunteer leadership led to a job with Camden Lutheran Housing, where he expanded BSI to North Camden. BSI now has 554 households participating. In 2017, milestones included: part-time jobs created for 12 local residents, 36 vacant lots were stabilized, and 240 new Block Supporter households were engaged. Most important, Pino’s vision has led to a tangible and visible difference in one of Camden’s most historically violent neighborhoods. For his efforts in transforming a

neighborhood into a safe place to live, **Pino has been awarded the \$50,000 Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award.**

**REV. MILDRED FARRAR of PATERSON** (Passaic County) **is the recipient of the \$35,000 award.** She has been working in the Paterson community since the late 70's. Many years ago, when her 15-year-old daughter became pregnant, Mildred was there to guide her through that challenging time. Decades later, as Mildred's 82nd birthday approached, she decided she wanted leave a legacy to help other teen mothers. When her neighbor's house became available, she purchased it and created "Millie's Place: A House of Refuge," a place for teen and single mothers to gather, receive supportive services and create a path forward for their own families. The program incorporates financial literacy, mothering skills and tangible support such as food and clothing. Soon after, Mildred launched the Faith in Action Community Development Corporation, which assists nearly 100 families weekly, providing fresh food, clothing, household items and often a listening ear in the Greater Paterson area. Mildred, who is approaching her 87th birthday, has helped countless women and continues to serve her community.

After surviving a near-fatal car accident in 2004 that resulted in Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD, **MELISSA GERTZ of RINGOES** (Hunterdon County) endured countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies. She emerged with an acute understanding of what it is like to be disabled and to fight endlessly for disability payments while incredibly ill, medicated, and just trying to get her life back in order. This experience led her to use her law career to help other disabled people, and she founded the Community Justice Center in 2009, an innovative legal services non-profit based in Trenton serving low-income/homeless disabled people and returning disabled veterans and their families. The Center, operating primarily in central New Jersey, was the first of its kind in New Jersey, representing low-income disabled veterans before both the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Social Security Administration. The Community Justice Center is transforming lives—not merely by providing legal assistance, but by providing something more priceless, namely hope. Through collaboration with community organizers and advocates, civil rights activists, veterans, and other experts, the Community Justice Center endeavors to encourage the empowerment, resiliency, and rights of those struggling with disabilities. For her tireless advocacy, **Melissa is the winner of the \$25,000 award.**

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

**EDRICK ALLEYNE of EATONTOWN** (Monmouth County) was playing with his children at Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park last September, when he heard a man shout "Somebody help! My nephew is drowning!" Looking out at the ocean, Edrick saw Dustin Fleischer, a 28-year old professional boxer, caught in a rip current about 50 yards off shore. Edrick was the only person brave enough to get into the water. "Something came over me and told me to do it," he later said. He went about 25 yards out into the water—up to his neck in the rough surf-- and began coaching Dustin to ride the waves in. Once Dustin was close enough, Edrick was able to grab him and bring him to safety. Exhausted and disoriented, Dustin never got his rescuer's name after the incident, so he contacted the Asbury Park Press for help. Edrick's girlfriend Dawn (who is here today) saw the story online, and the two men met, giving Dustin a chance to thank this brave young man who saved his life.

**EILEEN GOFF** of **FORT LEE** (Bergen County) is an advocate and leader who has been making a difference in the lives of people with vision loss and other disabilities since 1974. Her first initiative was the Shining Lights Program that addressed the leisure-time and independent living needs of older adults with disabilities, which serves as a model nationwide. In 1978, Eileen founded **Athletics for Blind Leisure Enthusiasts (ABLE)** to provide year-round active outdoor activities. A few years later, she established Heightened Independence and Progress (HIP), an agency that helps the independent living needs of Bergen County residents with disabilities. Eileen went on to start Multimedia Transcription Service to ensure that print material would be accessible to individuals with vision loss by transcribing it to Braille. As a result, books have been produced in 42 states. She promoted the barrier-free renovation initiative that helped disabled Bergen County residents equip their homes to meet their needs, and initiated legal action against developers who failed to address barrier-free needs in new construction. Eileen has been a tireless advocate for the inclusion of disabled people in the communities and is a role model to others who live with vision loss.

As a young teacher of children with disabilities, **TOBA GROSSBAUM** of **LIVINGSTON** (Essex County) was troubled by her students' struggles and loneliness, and the lack of respite options for parents. In 2000, she and her husband Zalman founded the Friendship Circle of New Jersey to address this need. The Friendship Circle offers social and recreational opportunities for children and teens with special needs, designed to nurture confidence and self-esteem in a safe, warm, and welcoming environment. Friendship Circle's distinctive approach of pairing participants with teen volunteers motivates, inspires and enriches everyone involved. More than 6,500 teens have become volunteer mentors and friends to children with disabilities – providing 42,000 volunteer hours annually. The Friendship Circle now has six locations in New Jersey and 85 around the world. Toba is the driving force behind the creation of LifeTown, a state-of-the-art 53 thousand square foot simulated village – the first of its kind in the region -- that will help prepare young people with special needs for independent living.

**A'DORIAN MURRAY-THOMAS** of **NEWARK** (Essex County) lost her father to gun violence at the age of seven. Out of that tragedy, she learned the importance of having a support system to help navigate life after an immense loss. When she was just a college sophomore, A'Dorian created SHE WINS to reach other young women from Newark who have been affected by violence. Focusing on social justice, mentorship, and leadership development, SHE WINS equips girls with the skills needed to not only excel academically, but to help solve the issues that most affect their lives and communities. Since founding SHE WINS in 2015, A'Dorian has helped more than 200 girls between the ages of 10 and 15 through summer, after-school, workshop, and conference programs. A'Dorian's passion is to empower the next generation of young women leaders from the City of Newark to be agents of positive change.

The journey for **JODI O'DONNELL-AMES** of **TITUSVILLE** (Mercer County) began in 1995 when her late husband Kevin O'Donnell was diagnosed with ALS (Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease). Sadly, Kevin passed away in 2001. Jodi later married a man who had also lost his spouse to ALS. After witnessing the effect the disease had on her children and stepchildren, she created

an organization called “Hope Loves Company” in 2009 to provide educational and emotional support to children and teens who had or have loved ones battling ALS. It is the only nonprofit in New Jersey—and in the entire country -- dedicated solely to helping children of ALS patients. Hope Loves Company holds free weekend retreats that allow these children--many of whom serve as "caregivers" to parents--a chance to 'just be kids' for a short time. Counseling is offered, team building and coping skills are taught, and children are able to bond with others who understand what they are going through. So far, 15 camps in five states have hosted hundreds of children and family members, and there has been interest from every state in the country.

**DON QUIGLEY** of **MANALAPAN** (Monmouth County) co-founded the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide in January of 2005 after experiencing the devastating loss of his teenage son, Sean, the year before. The mission of the organization is to increase awareness and reduce suicides by empowering teens, parents and educators with the emotional guidance and skills needed to help those at risk. Because of the Society’s efforts, New Jersey became the first state to require all educators to complete at least two hours of instruction in suicide prevention as part of their professional development. SPTS has presented in-person to more than 12,500 educators, parents and students and trained over 250,000 educators through its online training program. The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide’s life-saving resources reach more than 236,000 individuals each year.

**ETHAN SANDLOFER** of **UPPER SADDLE RIVER** (Bergen County) knows that “kids can make a difference.” At just 11 years old, Ethan has raised close to \$400,000 for rare cancer research through “E’s Battle Buddies,” an organization he began in honor of his late mother, Gabby, who died of a rare form of cancer when he was just two years old. E’s Battle Buddies hosts kid-oriented events providing high energy, interactive activities, such as indoor cycling and obstacle runs, while raising awareness and money for lifesaving rare cancer research, and teaching kids the importance of giving back. Last summer, Ethan donated \$90,000 to the John Theurer Cancer Center at Hackensack University Medical Center to fund groundbreaking research and clinical trials, pay travel expenses for cancer patients and their families, and purchase prosthetics for patients who have had amputations due to cancer. This month, Ethan is hosting the 2018 Kids Fighting Cancer fundraiser in Bergen County, which has already raised more than \$60,000.

In 2008, **CARLA SCARABINO** of **MONMOUTH BEACH** (Monmouth County) co-founded The Beauty Foundation for Cancer Care, a volunteer-led nonprofit with a mission to alleviate the tremendous physical, emotional, and financial strain that cancer treatment places on families. The Beauty Foundation raises money to offset the expenses that families face -- which often aren’t covered by insurance -- such as child care, household expenses, transportation, and meals. Under Carla’s leadership, The Beauty Foundation has supported approximately 1,500 cancer patients, by providing more than \$2 million in grants and services to families throughout New Jersey. By partnering with a broad group of like-minded organizations, they are able to provide patients and their families with critical information, resources and support for their journey to fight cancer.

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Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state's premier public liberal arts college. Ranked among the top colleges in the region by College Choice and recognized by, among others, U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review, Colleges of Distinction and also designated by Victory Media as a "Military Friendly College," Ramapo College is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding.

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 business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Educational Technology, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education.