

Union County Human Relations Commission

# UCHRC

## Biannual Report May 2016 — May 2018

*I alone cannot change the **world,***

*but I can cast a stone across the waters*

*to create many **ripples.***

*Mother Teresa*

c/o Office of the Union County Prosecutor  
Andrew K. Ruotolo Justice Center, 32 Rahway Avenue, Elizabeth, New Jersey 07202  
908.889.9028    uchrc@ucnj.org    www.ucnj.org/uchrc

# Union County Human Relations Commission

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** The Honorable Michael A. Monahan, Acting Union County Prosecutor

**FROM:** Nora Mislán and Mark Spivey, UCHRC Co-Chairs

**DATE:** May 1, 2018

Dear Prosecutor Monahan:

The purpose of this annual report is to provide you with an overview of some of the recent showcase initiatives of the Union County Human Relations Commission (UCHRC), and to thank you and the Union County Prosecutor's Office for your support and participation. Without that, none of what we do would be possible.

The focus and the power of the UCHRC and our current programs can be quickly grasped through words spoken by Mother Teresa:

*"We alone cannot change the world,  
but we can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."*

The UCHRC has continued to take an active role in fostering harmony and good will among the diverse citizenry of Union County, and in improving standards and quality of life among numerous populations. We have worked diligently to maintain past programs that have been successful.

We are proud of our accomplishments with our *PASS THE MESSAGE ON* bias-prejudice reduction program, piloted at Linden High School for the past eight years. Through this program, we work to create a paradigm shift in how young people perceive themselves and others with relation to stereotypes, bias, and prejudice, with an eye to be careful of their word choices and behaviors, striving to empower them to share their insights and lessons learned with younger students so we can stop the cycle of hate and violence. The program is currently being showcased on NJTV's 2017/18 Classroom Closeup program.

Our *POLICE AND TEENS TOGETHER* program is in its 19th year, and continues a dialogue between youth and law enforcement that has demonstrated a powerful impact to help local students better understand and positively regard law enforcement. This interactive program continues to be presented as part of the regular curriculum at New Providence High School, while returning to other local schools on a rotating basis. Our Train The Trainer workshop has expanded its outreach to other municipal and college departments statewide. We hope to further influence them to seek out officer assistance when they need help, or when someone else does.

Through our InterFaith Community Network, with the assistance of Union County's houses of worship and other community partners, we have provided distressed homeowners facing foreclosure with resources to help them find more secure footing to take them toward a brighter future.

We have offered parents the opportunity to enhance their understanding and skills to afford their children the best opportunity to achieve academic excellence, and to encourage their children to reach for the stars.

We also have offered public workshops to educators, parents, and social service agencies so that they can better understand the world of LGBTQIA individuals — particularly transgender youth — including terminology, physiology, sociology, and the law, in the hope of increasing awareness, and providing resources and an action plan on how to better assist and support these individuals in our educational and social settings.

Our UNITY ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS, now in their 17th year, continue to honor those individuals and organizations who do extraordinary things on behalf of others.

We look forward to our continued partnership to positively impact the lives of Union County's citizens, with an eye toward improving relationships and helping our county community, and our world, become a better place.

## 2017 Unity Achievement Award Recipients

Missions Possible New Jersey / Robin Johnstone and Melina Thompson, founders (Community Organization) for doing small things with great love to make a big difference in children's lives

Imagine, Inc., Westfield/ Mary Robinson, Executive Director (Nonprofit Organization) for lovingly transforming loss and vulnerability into resilience, empathy, compassion, and strength

American Muslims for Hunger Relief (Nonprofit Organization) for a widespread volunteer effort to eradicate hunger, creating a positive impact through compassion and generosity on those whose lives they touch

Mobile Meals Of Westfield/Josephine Walsh (Nonprofit Organization) for providing a crucial community service with priceless dedication and heart

Nicholas Tarabokia/Berkeley Heights Public Schools (Student) for transforming a fearsome hardship to inspire hope, instill courage, and bring joy, comfort, and support to children and families battling cancer

Alexandra Jackman, Westfield High School (Student) for already, at a young age, opening up the world for special needs individuals, and opening up the eyes of those around her to their value

Terri Todd, Fashion Against Bullying (F.A.B.) Coalition for providing a safety net for teenagers to creatively express themselves while building self-esteem, mutual respect, and life skills

Capt. Wally Torian, Plainfield Auxiliary Police Division (Law Enforcement) for a lifetime of volunteerism, community service, and civic activism

Lt. James Schneider, Westfield Police Department (ret.) (Law Enforcement) for his outstanding achievements as a model law enforcement officer and his lifelong commitment to save lives and turn the light back on for those shrouded in darkness and despair

Union County Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Volunteers (Public Service) for volunteering to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves

Carolyn George, Berkeley Heights Recreation Department (Public Service) for being a role model in, and tireless inspirational leader for, her community

Kevin Murphy, U.S. Air Force, N.J. Air National Guard, N.J. Army National Guard, U.S. Army (ret.) (Military/Veteran) for a lifetime of service to our country and his continued determined commitment to support and improve quality of life for our veterans

Sgt. Brett D'Alessandro, U.S. Marine Corps (ret.) (Military/Veteran) for his service to our country, and his unselfish dedication to improve the state of life for homeless veterans, to whom we owe so much



**BACK ROW:** Retired U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Brett D'Alessandro; Alexandra Jackman; Nicholas Tarabokia; Capt. Wally Torian, Plainfield Police Auxiliary Division; Lt. James Schneider, Westfield Police Department (ret.); Kevin Murphy, U.S. Air Force, NJ Air National Guard, NJ Army National Guard, U.S. Army (ret.); Ghani Khan and his son, American Muslims for Hunger Relief; **FRONT ROW:** Maria Higginbotham, Union County Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Volunteers; Robin Johstone and Melissa Thompson, Missions Possible of New Jersey; Josephine Walsh, Mobile Meals of Westfield; Carolyn George; Terri Todd; Mary Robinson, Imagine/A Center for Grief Counseling.



**W**e can learn a lot from Crayons. Some are sharp, some are pretty, some are dull, some have weird names, and all are different colors...  
but they all have to learn to live in the same box."

*Author Unknown*

# Unity Achievement Awards

## Celebrating the Richness of Life

The commissioners who volunteer their time and energies to serve on the UCHRC unequivocally agree that the best way to strive to accomplish our mission – to actively encourage, develop, promote, and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County – is to publicly honor those who already do it well.

The UCHRC's annual Unity Achievement Awards presentation honors everyday individuals and organizations that have contributed in an extraordinary manner to promote respect for human rights, human dignity, and cultural diversity throughout Union County.

Spring 2018 marks our 17th annual Unity Award presentation. Year after year, the inspirational and heartfelt event embraces the best that we, individually and collectively, give of ourselves on behalf of others, and touches the spirit of our Award recipients, their guests, and ourselves.

### 2018 Unity Achievement Award Recipients

Investors Savings Bank (Corporate/Business Enterprise) for its outstanding and extensive outreach to improve the quality of life for all citizens through community service

Unchained At Last – Westfield/Fraidy Reiss, Executive Director/Founder (Community Organization) for breaking down some horrific ties that bind to open and offer the world

Someone's Daughter/Natasha Davis, Founder/President (Nonprofit Organization) for changing the world...one girl at a time

Ingrid Johnson, RN, Atlantic Health System/Overlook Medical Center (New Jersey Human Trafficking Coalition representative) (Individual) for her tenacity to rescue her daughter and other children, and her work to assist survivors and eradicate human trafficking in our state, our country, and our world

Lieutenant Johnny Henderson, Plainfield Police Division (Law Enforcement) for almost two decades of dedicated service to Plainfield's youth

Carolyn M. Sorge, Scotch Plains Rescue Squad (Public Service) for decades of tireless public service as a role model and inspirational leader

Katherine Schug, Scotch Plains/Fanwood High School (Student) for standing up and speaking out to embrace her "differentness" and to turn a challenge into an opportunity

Marissa Steiner, Jonathan Dayton High School/Springfield (Student) for heartfelt dedication to providing an important community service

Samantha Vetter Kosty, Linden High School (Educator) for providing enthusiastic encouragement and support that lasts a lifetime

Tom Haydon, The Star-Ledger (ret.) (Media) for a lifetime of stellar work reporting on good news in New Jersey, including the last several years in Union County

First Presbyterian Church of Cranford: Rev. J. Christian Kile, Skip Winter, Catherine Felegi, and Janice E. Grevious (Clergy) for its multi-faceted outreach to serve those in its community, and the world

Refugee Assistance Partners/Jill Segulin, President (Faith-Based Organization) for putting thought into deed and painstakingly establishing a network to assist refugees in assimilating into our community

Joseph Nagy, WWII, United States Army and United States Army Reserves Veteran; Edward Miller, WWII, United States Army Air Corps Veteran; and Peter Klein, WWII, United States Army Veteran (Military/Veteran) for incredible service to our country, and for carrying all of us on your shoulders for a lifetime

Pat DiFabio (Special Achievement) for a lifetime of making a difference with a big heart and a big smile

Sgt. Michael D. Boll, Township of Union Police Department (Operation Rebound) (Special Achievement) for outstanding community service, and for providing the opportunity for individuals with special needs to learn to soar through athletics

Linden Firefighters "D" Platoon: Captain Salvatore Principato, Firefighters Daniel Diaz, Jose A. Espinal, Brian Paster, Daryl Roberts, and Peter Wronski (Special Achievement) for compassion that went above and beyond the call of duty

UCERT/SWAT/USAI Commander Martin Mogensen Union County Emergency Response Team (UCERT) members Patrolman Alexander Ruiz (Clark Police Department); Officer Elliot Bernard (Fanwood Police Department); Patrolman Sean Kaverick (Kenilworth Police Department); Detective Edward Nortrup (Roselle Park Police Department); Officer Dragan Ristovski (Township of Union Police Department); Detective Daniel Fay (Union County Prosecutor's Office); Officer Sean Holcomb (Union County Prosecutor's Office); Lieutenant James Guerrant (Union County Sheriff's Office); and Sergeant Manuel Cruz (Union County Sheriff's Office) (Special Recognition) for USAI NJ PRIDE aid deployment emergency response to help the residents of Puerto Rico by assisting local law enforcement in the wake of hurricane devastation

# Our Mission

The Union County Human Relations Commission (UCHRC) serves to promote and encourage a more inclusive society in Union County by providing support to bias crime victims who are targets of a crime because of their race, creed, color, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, socio-economic status, or physical or mental challenges, and by intervening to eradicate the conditions that ultimately cause bias.

The UCHRC addresses the issues of prejudice, bias, and racism, and their impact on our local schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Our mission, and the focus of our efforts and activities, is to actively encourage, develop, promote, and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County.

Simply stated, the UCHRC celebrates the richness of life that cultural diversity brings to our communities and ourselves.

## Police & Teens Together

**Cultivating Dialogue, Communication, and Mutual Respect**

The idea for a program to improve understanding and communication between youth and law enforcement was born 18 years ago out of a discussion at a regular meeting about then-current news events about altercations between citizens and police officers, some of which resulted in the shooting death of a suspect. The conversation evolved to focus on our own discomfort for ourselves and our licensed teenage children when a seemingly simple event such as a motor vehicle stop occurred.

The Police & Teens Together (PATT) Program was launched at Elizabeth High School one year later, in Spring 2000, and has been presented countywide at all high schools in Union County's 21 municipalities. The New Providence Police Department has presented the program annually since 2003, and many other local police departments have continued the program on their own from time to time, or have invited us back to assist.

In the first session, "Youth Perspectives on Law Enforcement," the students speak out about their own encounters with law enforcement officers – when it happened, what happened, and what were they thinking and feeling during and after the encounter. In the second, "Officers as People...and as Professionals," each participating officer introduces him/herself and talks about their life, their interests, and their family. After watching a graphic video in which an officer is killed during a simple motor vehicle stop, they speak about their careers and profession, and the job they have to do.

This dialogue is the perfect set-up for the third interactive, "Trading Places Role Play" session. The students go outside, and we bring in a squad car and a civilian car, and suit them up in vests, hats, and duty belts with fake guns so they can gain a better and first-hand perspective of being an officer conducting a traffic stop or dispersing a crowd, while the officers take on the role of being a teenage student.

By the fourth and final session, the students and officers have had the opportunity to speak with each other and get to know each other a little better, and have built up rapport, understanding, and mutual respect, while also having fun and learning more about the law, the role of a police officer, and what to do when a police officer approaches them on the street, at school, or while they are driving a car. Student responses on a post-program survey affirms the positive benefit and altered perspectives. For example, one student wrote:

*"If an officer comes up to a group of us after school, and some of the kids start acting up, I'm going to tell them to chill and just let the officer do his job."*



*The photos above from a recent high school program will give you some idea of the excitement and learning that take place.*

# Pass The Message On

## Empowering Students to Respect and Celebrate Diversity

Eight years ago, in 2010, the Union County Human Relations Commission set out to create a bias- and prejudice-reduction program for high school students. We partnered with the Linden Police Department's Juvenile Unit Supervisor, Lt. Keith Aslin, and our good friend and diversity educator, Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust of Spectrum Diversity LLC, to develop a program concept. We then met with Linden Superintendent of Schools Dr. Danny Robertozzi, who at that time was the high school principal. He connected us with history teacher Mrs. Monica Goncalves, which was a stroke of genius.

The program concept is to speak frankly about tough issues with juniors and seniors, who, by the end of the dialogue, are empowered to "pass the message on" to freshman and middle-schoolers about bias and ways to stop it. The younger students take the message to heart better if it is coming from someone closer to their own age. Individually, in groups, and then as a class, the students design creative activities and presentations that will encourage their audience to think about the subject and take the issue seriously.



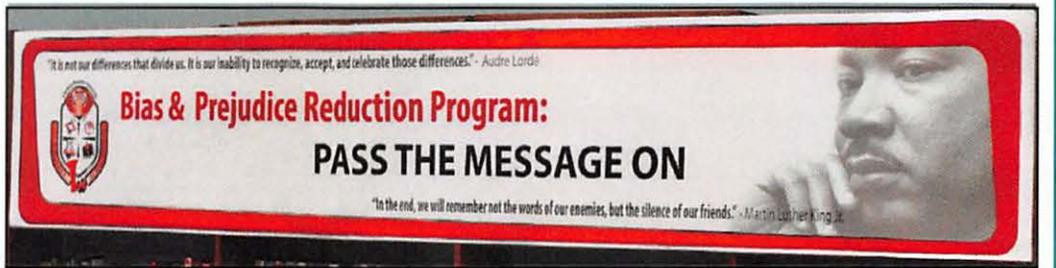
While the basic program elements have stayed the same, we have also tweaked them through the years. The added bonus this year was a December 2017 visit by the TV production crew of NJTV's Classroom Close-Up, an Emmy award-winning show that showcases positive things happening in public schools. They visited Linden High School to film the students' program presentation to the freshmen. Part of this year's offering, the spotlight program first aired on March 17, 2018.

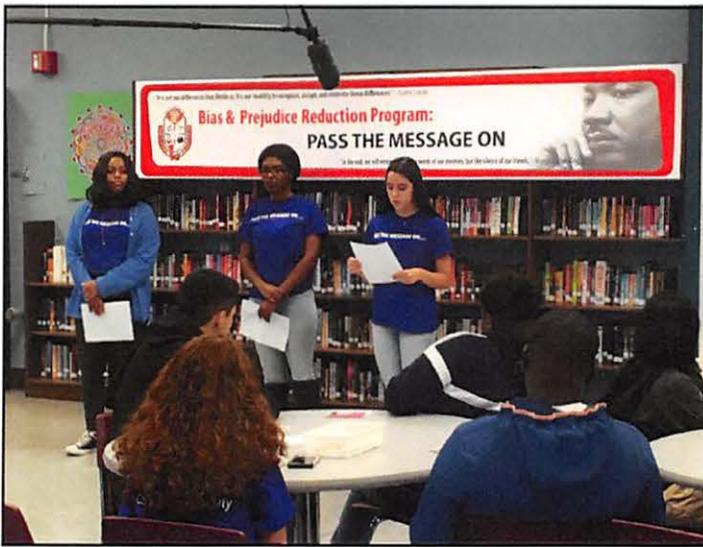
The students first take part in a series of workshops that help explore the causes and consequences of bias, prejudice, and hate – both in society at large and at home.

Dr. Rodriguez Rust (right) first speaks to the students about the sociological aspects of bias and prejudice – covering racial, ethnic, religion, LGBT diversity, age, weight, even height – all kinds of differences between people. "Things that might seem trivial to someone else can really impact someone else's life," she said. She shows the students that sometimes the things they may say every day can have a hidden meaning behind them.



The Linden Police Department then speaks to the students about the history of bias and hate in our country and the world, and then bring it home to current events and what is happening in Union County and the City of Linden. Pictured at left, Mrs. Monica Goncalves speaks with Linden Juvenile Officer David Nolasco.





Following the presentations, we share some of the creative writings that have been submitted by students in previous years, and as a homework assignment, ask these students to write down a personal reflection about how bias and prejudice have affected their lives. As part of their own presentations, students select several stories and poems that have been submitted (and for which written author approval to share has been provided) that they read to the underclassmen.

In every class, bullying and cyberbullying have been included in the discussion of stereotypes, bias, and prejudice. The Union County Human Relations Commission was one of the state leaders educating school staff, parents, and students about bullying and cyberbullying awareness and prevention in 2000 – one year after the Columbine tragedy – so we appreciate our ongoing efforts in this regard.

The students created three activities for this year's presentation:

Each freshman was given a plain piece of white paper, and was asked to crumple it up into a tight ball. Afterwards, they were asked to flatten the paper out again.

The student leader told the students that this is really the effect of a person who is bullied: Even if you apologize and try to take back your words or actions, the other person is still scarred.

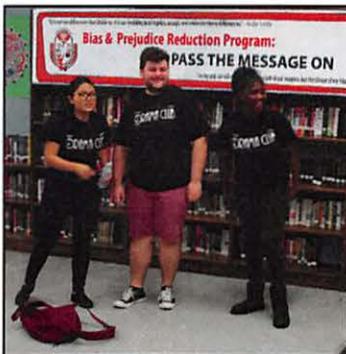
The second activity shows how quickly a remark, criticism, or off-hand comment can spread, even when unaided by technological tools. A female student leader took a photo of the teddy bear she was given in first grade and kept on her bed, and shared it with a friend. That friend shared the photo with two friends, who shared the photo with a few more friends...until in just one minute, everyone in the room had a copy of that teddy bear photo, along with the criticism, "She's such a baby! Look at this photo!"

For the third activity, the freshmen were asked to take a plain sheet of paper and write a positive message that they could share with their classmates during the rest of the day. The student leaders shared some of the comments they had written. "You are special!" "I'm always here for you." "I love your haircut!" "Believe in yourself!"



Three years ago, the high school's Drama Club joined in the effort.

They presented two skits depicting the downsides of bullying ("Her") – the suicide of a bullied classmate) and cyberbullying ("Send") – the arrest of two teens for sharing nude photos of a fellow student.



Through the Pass The Message On program, we are trying to teach and empower students. And although each class has been different, the students always take it to the next level, and teach us at the same time.



# LGBTQIA

# Public Forums

The UCHRC is grateful to Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust of Spectrum Diversity LLC for her ongoing partnership in educating the commissioners and the Union County community about issues affecting the LGBTQIA community. A sociologist and diversity educator, she is a renowned state expert on Harrassment/Intimidation/Bullying and LGBT issues. One of the key components she addresses is the accurate terminology and conceptual understanding of the lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, questioning, interex, and allies communities, and distinguishing between sex, gender identity, and gender expression, and the variety in gender identification. In November 2017, the UCHRC broke ground by offering the first New Jersey presentation, "What Parents Need To Know About Transgender Individuals." This free presentation was geared to help attendees better understand gender identity and transgender issues, and how to speak with children and adolescents about these sensitive topics and issues. We also premiered a full-day training workshop for educators in January 2018, "A Contemporary Challenge: Understanding and Meeting The Needs of Transgender Students in Accordance With the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, Title IX, and Best Practices," presented by Dr. Rodriguez Rust and co-sponsored by the Union County Prosecutor's Office. This training will provide educational professionals at elementary, middle, and high school levels with information, understanding, and strategies for addressing the needs of transgender students, and explores the social, medical, and legal aspects of transitioning to live in accordance with one's gender identity.

In our Fall 2017 pilot program, parents of elementary and middle school-aged children in Linden were invited to attend a free educational presentation, "Helping Your Child Succeed In School." The program was co-sponsored by the Office of the Union County Superintendent of Schools, the Office of the Linden Superintendent of Schools, and the Union County Division of Youth Services. The program is designed to provide inspirational and interactive dialogue to identify issues, strategies, and resources to improve the well-being and academic performance of our most precious resource – our youth. An educator from the Union County Division of Youth Services presented the formal presentation following opening remarks by UCHRC Unity Achievement Award recipient Terri Todd of The F.A.B. Coalition. The UCHRC is planning future presentations in other Union County municipalities, including presentations in Spanish.

Distressed property owners in foreclosure and those trying to avoid it have been able to get help, and hope, from the UCHRC's free educational presentation, "Foreclosure: Moving From Fear To Positive Action," held countywide for the past six years. Panelists from our partner sponsors – the New Jersey Public Defender's Office of Dispute Settlement, Union County Superior Court, and the Union County Foreclosure Task Force joined other knowledgeable experts from state and county agencies to identify available free resources and financial aid, as well as warn them about scams. Co-Chair Nora Mislan said, "I believe we can literally say we have helped every person who has attended to identify positive actions they can take to achieve the best possible outcome for themselves." Future offerings are on hold pending federal and state government funding decisions.



## Special Thanks

The UCHRC especially would like to thank **Acting Union County Prosecutor Michael A. Monahan** and the Union County Prosecutor's Office for their ongoing and invaluable support and encouragement.



## UCHRC Commissioners

### Co-Chairs:

Nora Mislan (Linden)

Mark Spivey, Union County Prosecutor's Office

### Recording Secretary:

Karen E. Positan (Springfield/Union County Prosecutor's Office)

### Commissioners: \* Asterisk indicates former Co-Chair

- ◆ Lorraine Aklonis (Clark) ◆ \*Barbara Boyer (Plainfield) ◆ \*Rev. Alfred E. Brown (Plainfield/Cranford)
- ◆ Dr. Aristo Carranza (Springfield) ◆ First Assistant Prosecutor Albert Cernadas, Jr., (Union County Prosecutor's Office)
- ◆ Detective Rudolfo Correia (Union County Prosecutor's Office Bias Unit) ◆ Dr. Martin Dickerson (Scotch Plains)
- ◆ \*Faheemah El-Amin (Plainfield) ◆ Flor Gonzalez (Plainfield) ◆ \*Sgt. Leonard Guarino (Elizabeth Police Department) (ret.)
- ◆ Jo Ann Hamilton (Linden) ◆ Capt. Dean Marcantonio (Union County Prosecutor's Office) ◆ Ana Martinez (Roselle)
- ◆ \*Peter McTiernan (Linden) ◆ Danni Newbury (Union County Office of LGBTQ Services)
- ◆ \*Charles Newman (Cranford) (Union County Office for the Disabled) (ret.) ◆ Constance Perkins (Scotch Plains)
- ◆ Virginia San Pedro (Elizabeth) ◆ Cliff Simon (Plainfield/Plainfield Human Relations Commission)
- ◆ Esmeralda Vargas (Berkeley Heights) ◆ Emma Villegas (Elizabeth) ◆ Linda Weissbrod (Scotch Plains)
- ◆ Rev. Samuel Wright (Union/Union Human Relations Commission) ◆ Detective Afstratios (Steve) Zevlikaris (Linden Police Department)

### Commissioners Emeritus:

- ◆ Dr. Carmen Musial Centuolo (Mountainside) ◆ \*James F. Keefe, Esq. (Scotch Plains) ◆ Raul Pinto (Union)
- ◆ \*Helene Scheuer (Elizabeth) ◆ \*Jack Weinshanker (Clark)