



20th Annual
Unity Achievement Award Presentation
Monday, May 1, 2023

Thirteen individuals, two organizations,
and 160 employees of the Union County Department of Public Safety
were recently presented with
the Union County Human Relations Commission's
prestigious Unity Award for Achievement,
to honor role models who dedicate their time and efforts
to activities and programs that raise and honor the human spirit.

The 2023 awards were presented during a special presentation
held at the Kean University's STEM Building in Union Township
on Monday evening, May 1st.

The Union County Human Relations Commission
proudly presents our
2023 Unity Achievement Award recipients



NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION	Rahway Food for Friends
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION	New Providence Intergenerational Club
INDIVIDUAL	Cindy Hannen, Chair, Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee
VETERAN/MILITARY	State VFW Commander Jay “Doc” Boxwell, United States Navy Veteran
LAW ENFORCEMENT	Detective Alex Lopez, Union County Prosecutor’s Office
EDUCATOR	Lynn Randle, Director of Guidance, Hillside High School
STUDENT	Michael Richards, Lamberts Mill Academy
BUSINESS ENTERPRISE	John Samsel/Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services
BUSINESS ENTERPRISE	Dr. Patrick Smith/Smith Chiropractic Association
PUBLIC SAFETY	160 employees of the Union County Department of Public Safety, Union County Office of Emergency Services, and Union County Police Department
SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT	Greg Muller, Union County Crisis Intervention Team Member Adrienne Robertiello, Special Needs/Autism Educator Detective Dariusz Tokarz, Union County Prosecutor’s Office Union County Deputy First Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik (ret.)
SPECIAL RECOGNITION	former UCHRC Commissioner Nora Mislán (Co-Chair 2016-2018) UCHRC Commissioner Martin Dickerson, Co-Chair 2021-2023

<i>Front row from left.....</i>	
New Providence Intergenerational Club members Mitchell Toomey, Steven Parker, Jack Lepre, Ben Fiscelli, and creator Konstantin Munoz	COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION
Adrienne Robertiello, Special Health Care/Autism Educator, Children's Specialized Hospital	SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT
Cindy Hannen, Chair, Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee	INDIVIDUAL
former UCHRC Commissioner Nora Mislan (Co-Chair 2016-2018)	SPECIAL RECOGNITION
<i>Second row.....</i>	
Lynn Randle, Director of Guidance, Hillside High School	EDUCATOR
UCHRC Commissioner Martin Dickerson, Co-Chair 2021-2023	SPECIAL RECOGNITION
John Samsel/Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services	BUSINESS ENTERPRISE
<i>Third Row.....</i>	
Rahway Food for Friends, President Patricia Carter	NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION
Union County Police Department Officer-In-Charge Captain Martin Mogensen	PUBLIC SAFETY
<i>Fourth Row.....</i>	
Greg Muller, Union County Crisis Intervention Team Member	SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT
Detective Alex Lopez, Union County Prosecutor's Office	LAW ENFORCEMENT
Union County Deputy First Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik (ret.)	SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT
<i>Top Row.....</i>	
Jay "Doc" Boxwell, United States Navy Veteran, State Commander of the New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars, and former Commander of Cranford V.F.W. All-American Post 335	MILITARY/VETERAN
Dr. Patrick Smith/Smith Chiropractic Association	BUSINESS ENTERPRISE
Detective Dariusz Tokarz, Union County Prosecutor's Office	SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT
<i>NOT PICTURED.....</i>	
Michael Richards, Lamberts Mill Academy who was presented with his award at the Lamberts Mill Academy on Wednesday, May 10th	STUDENT
New Providence Intergenerational Club member Samantha Zack	COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION
the 160 employees of the Union County Department of Public Safety who were invited to attend a special departmental presentation on Thursday, May 4th at the Public Safety Building in Westfield	PUBLIC SERVICE







UCHRC Co-Chair Dr. Martin Dickerson, Ed.D. welcomed everyone.
The event opened with the Posting of Colors by Cranford V.F.W. Post 335's All-American Color Guard,
led by Captain Braulio Lorenzo.



UCHRC Co-Chair Dr. Martin Dickerson, Ed. D. then introduced (from left)

UCHRC Co-Chair Chanell Johnson.

Chanell is an Assistant Prosecutor with the Union County Prosecutor's Office.
She also oversees the Office's Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

He also introduced Union County First Assistant Prosecutor James O. Tansey,
who oversees the UCHRC and also serves as a Commissioner,
and Union County Prosecutor William A. Daniel.

The Union County Human Relations Commission
was created by the Union County Prosecutor's Office in 1991.





Achievement by a Business Enterprise

John Samsel / Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services

*Recognition for responding to a need by creating a new pathway
to build a better future while strengthening the bonds of community*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Linda Weissbrod



Achievement by a Community Organization

New Providence Intergenerational Club

Award accepted by Konstantin Munoz (creator) and Steven Parker

Recognition for recognizing the priceless value of conversation, connection, and service to create a dynamic, compassionate, and inclusive community

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Laura Morana

Presenter and Club members pictured, from right:

UCHRC Commissioner Laura Morana

Konstantin Munoz (creator and co-founder)

Steven Parker (co-founder)

Mitchell Toomey

Jack Lepre

Ben Fiscelli

Samantha Zack



Special Achievement

**Detective Dariusz
Tokarz, Union County
Prosecutor's Office**

*Recognition for
a magnificent performance
to coalesce a network
in the name of humanity*

Presented by
UCHRC Commissioner
Sergeant Leonard Guarino,
Elizabeth Police
Department (ret.)

Above: Detective Darius Tokarz with his family, from right: his wife Katarzyna, son Jake, daughter Jessica, and toddler son Nicholas.

Below, with his family, UCPO staff members, and collection supporters Rev. Romanyk Rulan, Jan Krzystoy Leolowicz, and Rev. Krystion Burdzy





Special Achievement

Greg Muller, Team Member, Union County Crisis Intervention Training

*Recognition for bravely sharing himself and his story
so we can eliminate stigmas,
promote understanding,
and all grow stronger together*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Karen E. Positan



Achievement by a Business Enterprise

**Dr. Patrick Smith, Chiropractor
Smith Chiropractic Foundation**

*Recognition for building it,
watching everyone come,
and doing even more amazing things*

Presented by
UCHRC Commissioner Esmeralda Vargas





Achievement by a Nonprofit Organization

Rahway Food for Friends

Award accepted by Patricia Carter, President

*Recognition for starting simply and growing exponentially
to abate the hunger of people's bodies and souls*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Faheemah El-Amin



Achievement by an Individual

Cindy Hannen, Chair, Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee

*Recognition for
her sense of community service and charity,
and her ongoing commitment
to bring all people together
in understanding and shared purpose*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Karen E. Positan



Achievement in Law Enforcement

Detective Alex R. Lopez, Union County Prosecutor's Office

*Recognition for advocating for Union County to be a respectful and caring place
that stands only for inclusion, equality, and justice*

**Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Detective Grace Proetta,
Union County Prosecutor's Office**



Achievement by a Veteran/Military

**Jay Boxwell, U.S. Navy Veteran
State Commander, New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars
past Commander, Cranford V.F.W. Post 335**

*Recognition for his service to his country, his fellow veterans,
our POW-MIAs, and the New Jersey community*

**Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Sergeant Leonard Guarino,
Elizabeth Police Department (ret).**



Achievement by an Educator

Lynn Randle, Guidance Counselor, Hillside High School

*Recognition for
a lifetime of top-notch guidance and counseling
with life-changing outcomes*

Presented by UCHRC Co-Chair Dr. Martin Dickerson, Ed. D.



Achievement in Public Safety

Union County Department of Public Safety

Union County Office of Emergency Services, Union County Police Department, et al

Recognition for a widespread, collaborative, compassionate effort and singular dedication to lead Union County through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

Presented by UCHRC Co-Chair Chanell Johnson

PHOTOS FROM THE DEPARTMENTAL PRESENTATION ON THURSDAY, MAY 4th

Presented by UCHRC Co-Chairs Chanell Johnson and Dr. Martin Dickerson,
Union County First Assistant Prosecutor James O. Tansey
and Commissioner Karen E. Positan



From right: UCHRC Co-Chair Chanell Johnson,
First Assistant Prosecutor James O. Tansey,
Acting Union County Public Safety Director Dennis Burke,
Union County Police Officer-In-Charge Captain Martin Mogensen,
Office of Emergency Services Director Michael Scanio,
Office of Emergency Services Deputy Director William Kane,
Fire Academy Director Michael Tomasich,
Regional 9-1-1 Communications Center Coordinator Gareth Williams, and
Division of Health Acting Director Caroline Sorge.

Below: A handful of Department of Public Safety employees with the presenters.





Special Achievement

**Adrienne Robertiello, Special Health Care & Autism Educator
Children's Specialized Hospital**

*Recognition for shifting society's perception so that the "differently able" can be uplifted
to have a voice and opportunity in an inclusive, accessible, and equitable community*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Beth Giannobile



Special Achievement

Union County Deputy First Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik (ret.)

*Recognition for
changing the game for youth victims,
“differently able” individuals,
and criminal offenders
in our county, our state, and one day, our world*

Presented by Union County’s Prosecutor William A. Daniel
and UCHRC Commissioner/First Assistant Prosecutor James O. Tansey

PHOTOS FROM THE PRESENTATION AT THE SCHOOL ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 10th
Achievement by a Student

Michael Richards, Lamberts Mill Academy, Westfield

*Recognition for always looking out for others, providing needed aid or support
with a smile and a reassuring and kind-hearted approach
that leave positive energy and joy in their wake*

Presented by UCHRC Commissioner Lorraine Aklonis



UCHRC Commissioner Lorraine Aklonis announced the Award for Achievement by a Student at the Monday, May 1st event. She presented the actual award to Michael at the Lambert's Mill Academy on Wednesday, May 10th. The presentation was attended by Commissioner Karen E. Positan, Michael's mother, Mrs. Nadine Wright, and sister Catresa, Union County Educational Services Commission Superintendent of Schools Carrie Datillo, Lamberts Mill Academy principal Reed Leibfried, a few staff members, and three of Michael's classmates.

With our sincerest thanks!



Special Recognition

Nora Mislan
UCHRC Co-Chair 2016 to 2018
UCHRC Commissioner
2005 to 2022

Recognition for
*her honorable, steadfast
dedication, leadership and service
to the
Union County Human Relations Commission
and the county residents we serve*



Special Recognition

Dr. Martin Dickerson, Ed.D.
UCHRC Co-Chair 2021 to 2023

Recognition for
*his honorable, steadfast
dedication and leadership
serving as
Co-Chair of the
Union County Human Relations Commission
for his two-year term
from 2021 to 2023*

Achievement Awards Honor Outstanding Citizens at Union County Human Relations Commission's Unity Award Presentation

Thirteen individuals, two organizations, and 160 employees of the Union County Department of Public Safety were recognized by the Union County Human Relations Commission at the 20th annual Unity Achievement Award presentation held on Monday, May 1 at the Kean University STEM Center in Union Township. The award recipients were nominated and selected for fostering human rights, human relations, and human dignity among the people of Union County.

This year's award categories include achievements by corporate/business enterprises, community organizations, a nonprofit organization, individuals, students, educators, a veteran, members of law enforcement, and public servants.

"The commission is proud to recognize our local role models who dedicate themselves to helping others and strengthening our communities," Commission Co-Chair Dr. Martin Dickerson said. "These regular people do extraordinary things to make others' lives better, and the evening's presentation highlights all of the good that is being accomplished in Union County."

The mission of the Union County Human Relations Commission is to actively encourage, develop, promote, and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County, while working to eradicate prejudice, bias, and hate from our school, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

"The volunteers who dedicate their time and talents to serve on the Commission unequivocally agree that one of the best ways to strive to accomplish this mission is to publicly honor those who already do it well," the Commission's other co-chair, Union County Prosecutor's Office Assistant Prosecutor Chanell Johnson, said.

The recipients of the 2020 Unity Achievement Awards are

John Samsel/Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services (Business Enterprise);

Dr. Patrick Smith/Smith Chiropractic Association (Business Enterprise);

The New Providence Intergenerational Club and founder Konstantin Munoz (Community Organization);

Rahway Food for Friends (Nonprofit Organization);

Cindy Hannen, Chair, Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee (Individual);

Detective Alex Lopez, Union County Prosecutor's Office (Law Enforcement);

Michael Richards, Lamberts Mill Academy (Student);

Lynn Randle, Director of Guidance, Hillside High School (Educator);

Jay "Doc" Boxwell, United States Navy Veteran, State Commander of the New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars, and former Commander of Cranford V.F.W. All American Post 335 (Military/Veteran);

Greg Muller, Union County Crisis Intervention Team Member (Special Achievement);

Detective Dariusz Tokarz, Union County Prosecutor's Office (Special Achievement);

Adrienne Robertiello, Special Health Care/Autism Educator, Children's Specialized Hospital (Special Achievement)

retired Union County Deputy First Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik (Special Achievement)

Nora Mislan (Special Recognition),

and the 160 employees of the Union County Department of Public Safety.

The Department of Public Safety employees, recognized for their widespread, collaborative, compassionate effort and singular dedication to lead Union County through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, were honored at a separate presentation held at the Public Safety Building in Westfield on Thursday, May 4th .

The Commissioners also thanked retired life-long educator Dr. Martin Dickerson Ed.D., of Scotch Plains, whose two-year term as co-chair ends in 2023, and presented him with a Special Recognition award.

The Commission, created by the Union County Prosecutor's Office in 1991, is comprised of diverse volunteers who represent the county community, who attend regular meetings held throughout the year, and participate in special public forums and events.

"Our 2023 honorees are as diverse as the target populations that they work with, for, and on behalf of," said Union County First Assistant Prosecutor James Tansey, who serves as a Commissioner and advisor.

The Commission is actively seeking individuals who represent Union County's 21 towns and our incredible diversity to serve as Commissioners. If you are interested in becoming a member, please email uchrc@ucnj.org.

Nominations are now open for the 2024 Unity Achievement Awards. For more information about the Commission, past award recipients, or to submit a nomination, visit its website at www.ucnj.org/uchrc.



Union County Human Relations Commission

c/o Union County Prosecutor's Office
32 Rahway Avenue, Elizabeth, New Jersey 07202
908-527-4557 www.ucnj.org/uchrc uchrc@ucnj.org

UCHRC Commissioners



From left:

Dalvin Adebiyi (UCPO Diversity and Inclusion Committee)
Co-Chair Martin Dickerson, Ed.D. (Scotch Plains, Hillside) -- (Co-Chair 2021-2023)
Karen E. Positan (UCPO, Springfield)
Co-Chair Chanell Johnson (UCPO Diversity and Inclusion Committee)
Beth Giannobile (Clark)
Faheemah El-Amin (Plainfield) -- (Co-Chair 2000-2002)
Lorraine Aklonis (Clark)
Laura Morana (New Providence)
Linda Weissbrod (Rahway, Scotch Plains) -- (incoming Co-Chair 2023-2025)
Sgt. Leonard Guarino, Elizabeth Police Department (ret.) --(Co-Chair 2014-2016)
Guest and Honorary member Ruth E. Positan
Nora Mislan -- 2023 Award Recipient, former Commissioner -- (Co-Chair 2016-2018)

Constance "Connie" Perkins (Scotch Plains)
Marjorie Young (Plainfield)
Esmeralda Vargas (Berkeley Heights)



Award Recipients By Town

BERKELEY HEIGHTS

Dr. Patrick Smith's Smith Chiropractic Foundation (Berkeley Heights) financially supports local businesses and charities, and engage in a wide variety of community-based fundraising events.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Corporate/Business Enterprise

Dr. Patrick R. Smith, Chiropractor, Smith Chiropractic Foundation

Recognition for

building it, watching everyone come, and doing even more amazing things

The time for the 5K race had come, and Dr. Patrick Smith -- a chiropractor dedicated to family health and wellness, who prides himself on his networking and organizational skills -- thought the town of Berkeley Heights could not only host one, but even turn a profit to donate back to support local community organizations. It was (time), they did (race), and he did (donate). Last year, the race celebrated its 25th Anniversary. The races, which draw thousands of runners and walkers, are now under the purview of the Smith Chiropractic Foundation, which has raised over \$300,000 on behalf of the community. One hundred percent of the donations and participant fees go to annual charitable donations.

The first race didn't go exactly as planned, because, unfortunately, a healthy local businessman, racing with his two sons, suffered a fatal heart attack at the finish line. That could have been the end of the endeavor, save for the grace of the businessman's widow, who said her husband would want the races to continue. Deeply affected, and ever on the lookout for a way to help and add value, Dr. Smith ultimately oversaw the outfitting each of Berkeley Heights Police Department's three duty cars with portable defibrillators, included training, and purchased the first himself. AT&T/Lucent provided a local community grant to purchase the additional two. Next year, all three cars were present at the race, which was dedicated to that businessman. The defibrillators saved the lives of two people that first year alone, but more importantly, the town's first responders were now outfitted to save even more.

The Foundation's donations last year assisted first responders, the library, a church -- veterans' organizations, an Eagle Scout, and a local family-in-need. That race was the first of a plethora of undertakings, including restoring the free Summer Concerts in the Park, which bring everyone together. The Foundation's purview has also moved beyond the town lines, including leading a drive to collect shoes to be re-used by people in need domestically and globally; raising Post-Hurricane Sandy donations -- prompted by local teens -- to help rebuild some of the beach boardwalks; and supplying emergency relief grants to Manville's Hurricane Ida victims.

His civic-minded Irish immigrant grandparents taught him many lessons, but one that drives him today is "If you can, you should." When Dr. Smith first presented his idea to run the race and donate the money back to the community, the first reaction he got was "What?!?! Nobody does that." His response was, "Why not?" Dr. Smith -- ever true to his Irish family motto -- shrugs it off and says "amazing things have happened since that first race." We wish Dr. Smith, the Foundation, his very supportive family, and community they serve continued amazing success.

CRANFORD

Cindy Hannen (Cranford) has a strong sense of community service and charity, and remains committed to bring everyone together in understanding and shared purpose.

Unity Award for Achievement by an Individual

Cindy Hannen, Chair, Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee

Recognition for

her sense of community service and charity, and her ongoing commitment to bring all people together in understanding and shared purpose

Cindy Hannen, a Cranford resident, is one of those people you would love to clone, for every reason. Always gracious and positive, she exemplifies a contagious energy and spirit of giving, and is always ready and willing to pitch in when a project or other need pops up. Her strength lies not only in work she has done herself, but in her ability to pull people together. Her inspirational spirit and leadership encourage people to come out and work together as a community to serve the community, while also motivating others to give their best as well.

Cindy is a valued member of the Cranford community because she is a good friend and neighbor, and her extensive history of volunteerism and service covers contributions in many capacities for important organizational and community projects, sometimes as the driving force.

Cindy is a unique person whose sense of community and what those of her faith call Christian charity -- which really simply comes down to respecting and honoring humankind -- is immense.

She is a driver for St. Michael Roman Catholic Church's Samaritan Ministry, which delivers 300-400 sandwiches to St. Joseph's Soup Kitchen in Elizabeth every Monday. For its Salt and Light Ministry, she makes "Feed My Lambs" snack bags on weekdays for school children, family meal bags on weekends for Family Promise in Elizabeth, Catholic Charities, and Cranford Family Care, and helps with its holiday dinners. During the pandemic, she also assisted with the drive-up/drop-off of meal supplies.

Cindy has shared that she would "rather be a worker bee every day of the week, as opposed to taking the lead." But she stepped up to become Chair of the Cranford Interfaith Human Relations Committee in 2006 when the former chair stepped down, and has served with dedication and determination ever since. As Chair, Cindy leads Committee projects and events, and the dialogue among the members about local issues. The Cranford Interfaith Committee, an active organization, is especially proud of two of their major initiatives honoring Martin Luther King: a scholarship program, awarded to local high school seniors, and, in partnership with the Cranford Clergy Council, an annual award for outstanding contributions in the field of Human and Civil Rights. No one was surprised that Cindy was unanimously selected as this year's recipient. Cindy certainly manifests all of the ideals and commitments of Dr. King, and personifies the belief that if we come together openly and thoughtfully and are willing to understand each other better, we can all honor and respect the humanity of all people.

CRANFORD

A game changer, U.S. Navy veteran corpsman Jay "Doc" Boxwell, Commander of the New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars, and former Commander of the Cranford V.F.W. Post 335, continues to serve his country and our veterans as by addressing the many needs of disenfranchised vets throughout the state, including food, medical, and rental assistance, expanding charitable service activities that benefit members, and working diligently to collect DNA that has already helped to identify seven New Jersey MIA soldiers.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Veteran

**Jay Boxwell, U.S. Navy Veteran
former Post Commander, Cranford V.F.W. Post 335
State Commander, New Jersey V.F.W.**

Recognition for

his service to his country, his fellow-veterans, our POW-MIAs, and the NJ community

Jay "Doc" Boxwell Jr. -- born to a family with a long and storied military history going back at least to the Civil War -- had no idea his enlistment in the U.S. Navy would one day lead to his being the State Commander for the Department of New Jersey Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Jay's Dad, a Marine who lost a foot to a Viet Nam landmine, envisioned his son as a corpsman working in a naval hospital. Jay envisioned being with a superstar Marine team with high profile duties, which, graduating at the top of his class at Camp Lejeune, is exactly what he got. He served during the Iran Contra Affair under Oliver North, in Libya following the bombing of Pam Am Flight 73, as a member of President Reagan's advanced medical team, and on board the stellar U.S. Iowa battleship, with his last deployment in 1987/88 during the Iran/Iraq Oil Tanker Wars. Finally, after being discharged from active duty, he continued on with the Marine's 6th Motor Battalion reserve unit in Red Bank, until he got reactivated in 1990 when Kuwait was invaded, before finally being discharged again and coming home.

While on leave during his last year of service, on a bus trip with his Dad, he was recruited as a member of the South Plainfield VFW post. When he and his wife moved to her hometown of Cranford, it took him quite a while to finally locate the Cranford VFW Post 335 building. He went to a meeting, transferred his membership, and then set the post in a whirlwind to revitalize and re-energize it. As Post Commander, he literally put it on the map, at first, through the Color Guard, and then through its charitable service activities to benefit its members.

Through COVID, members delivered food to the homebound, provided support to vets living in facilities, held bi-monthly blood drives, and participated in several outdoor ceremonies that people could attend.

The Cranford Post was his launching board to the state and national levels. Heading the State POW/MIA department, he collected family DNA that led to identifying seven MIA soldiers from New Jersey. He chaired the membership committee, the homeless committee, which gave him a high level view of the many needs of disenfranchised vets throughout the state, including rental assistance, food, and medical. He hosted a service fair for vets in Cranford to address issues with vets, their family, and the whole network.

We thank Jay for his past and continuing service to our country, and look forward to seeing what he can accomplish with the global VFW organization as he continues to broaden his outlook and outreach to the VFWs, veterans, and communities of the world.

CLARK

John Samsel of John Samsel Real Estate Services (Clark) has created an annual scholarship for two high school seniors heading to trade school or planning to be an entrepreneur, which is one of the many community-focused activities he and his John Samsel Real Estate Services staff dedicate themselves to.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Corporate/Business Enterprise

John Samsel / Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services

Recognition for

*responding to a need by creating a new pathway to build a better future
while strengthening the bonds of community*

John Samsel will tell you that he is a local real estate broker, and the owner of Samsel and Associates Real Estate Services. But John is also a visionary, an integrator, a great neighbor, and -- well, an inspiration.

As a real estate broker, John has had a front row seat to watching young people wanting to purchase that first new home and start to build their lives, only to find out that their college debt burden and debt-to-income-ratio makes buying a home out of their reach.

John did not go to college until he was in his forties, because he wanted to gain more knowledge about something he was interested in, and could pay for it as he went. He didn't have to accumulate debt to get more education, or to make money.

John also owns a contracting company, and has struggled to find the qualified tradespeople he needs to fill the positions he has available. He said that he woke up one day in 2018 and thought, "I am going to offer scholarships to those who are breaking away from the traditional path for students today. Youth need to know they have other choices beyond 'you have to go to college if you want get a job / make money'."

The result of his mission is the endowment of an annual \$1,000 scholarship for one Union and one Middlesex County high school senior who, rather than going to college, is heading to trade school or planning to open a business and be an entrepreneur.

Recipients and their families are invited to dinner with John and his staff at his office. The application process includes a video explaining why they are choosing this path, what inspired them to make the decision, and raises a key question, how their choice will impact their community. John consistently keeps in contact with the awardees.

COMMUNITY is perhaps what John Samsel is all about, evidenced not only by his company motto -- Community Before Profits - - but more importantly by his actions. He has been involved with the Linden and Rahway Chamber of Commerce since 2017 (also supporting their college scholarship programs), and he and his staff are heavily involved in supporting local schools and houses of worship. They are also deeply engaged in supporting The Battered Womens' Shelter, providing furniture and small home appliances to assist families who are transitioning out of the shelter into their own apartment.

HILLSIDE

In her forty-year career, Hillside High School Guidance Counselor Lynn Randle (Hillside) provided top-notch guidance, counseling, and other assistance to high school students with extremely diverse needs, with life-changing outcomes.

Unity Award for Achievement by an Educator

Lynn Randle, Director of Guidance, Hillside High School

Recognition for

a lifetime of top-notch guidance and counseling with life-changing outcomes

A guidance counselor does not lead a classroom, but she affects student success as much as any teacher. The types of guidance and counseling she might need to offer are as varied as the student's walks of life, personalities, and individual circumstances and challenges.

Being approachable is the very first step toward gaining a student's confidence. That's a tall order unto itself. Communication follows, and builds momentum slowly. Only then can a guidance counselor, well, counsel and guide compassionately, intelligently, and effectively. But wonderful things happen once that door is open.

Confidentiality is one of the most important qualities in this relationship, so we will never really know the specifics of what has happened between Hillside High School guidance counselor Lynn Randle and the students she has dealt with over her forty-year career. It is not hard to imagine a second sandwich magically appearing for a student as she suggests they meet and talk over lunch about whatever the student is stressing over, or the challenges he might be facing -- at school, with friends, or even at home. Or her giving a ride home to a student still at school after hours whose ride home never showed up. She is the type of person who could even give a child who confided she was planning to drop out of school and run away a safe place to stay for a night, including a healthy dinner and some open dinner conversation about the importance of staying in school and having a plan to move forward. She would also possibly even give that student a ride back to school the next morning.

Knowing what really happened is not really important in the scheme of things, and it is a further tribute to Lynn that we will never know. What we do know, and why we honor her this evening, is for forty-years she has helped students improve their grades, their relationships, and certainly their outlooks for the future. Through the years, she has undoubtedly served as a trusted adult, a role model, a cheerleader, a friend, and perhaps even a second-parent figure. And along the way, over that forty-year journey, she very likely also saved a life or two or three. She has consistently created a caring bond with the students, families, and teachers who came to her for, well, guidance, and counseling. Lynn has always been approachable, and she is someone they all have turned towards in tough times. She has always been able to channel her empathy into a thoughtful, effective, and compassionate response, and has witnessed many positive outcomes.

NEW PROVIDENCE

New Providence Intergenerational Club Co-Founders Konstantin Munoz and Steven Parker bring together teens and senior citizens, provides priceless value of conversation, connection, and services while building the strengthening the bonds that create a dynamic, compassionate, and inclusive community.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Community Organization

New Providence Intergenerational Club

Award accepted by Konstantin Munoz

Recognition for

*recognizing the priceless value of conversation, connection, and service
to build and strengthen the bonds that create
a dynamic, compassionate, and inclusive community*

As we journey through life, we never know who or what will inspire us, or help us explore new pathways we might not otherwise have taken without that interaction. Konstantin Munoz, a New Providence resident, is a senior at Union County Vo-Tech's Magnet High School. His life changed while visiting his aunt in Maryland, working at her assisted living facility, helping out and conversing with seniors. That's where he met 98-year-old Dan. He can't recall exactly what they talked about, but even after a few interactions he said he felt like he was talking with someone he had known for decades, and had a connection he had never had, even with people his own age. Konstantin said that even though Dan has passed, he will remember him for the rest of his life.

Back home, Konstantin told his lifelong best friend, Steven Parker, a New Providence High School student, about his idea to interact with local senior citizens. They talked to more friends who enthusiastically agreed to actively participate, the New Providence Intergenerational Club was born.

A Facebook post offering their services to do odd jobs for free got one response — to rake leaves. But word spread, and seniors — and neighbors looking out for them — started requesting all types of assistance, including lawn work and help with technology. A favorite scheduled event is the monthly Tea with Teens at local parishes, where everyone shares stories or simply chats over tea and snacks. When school is closed, the teens play bingo, help as needed, and just converse with the seniors. Mentoring is a way the seniors give back. The teens value the opportunity to learn more about possible careers, along with insights about 'how they were when' versus how they might change.

Last Valentine's Day, the club went door-to-door at a senior housing complex to hand out boxes of home baked goods. The residents received their goodies, and all of the seniors were thankful. A lot of them were emotional to see that the teens cared about them. Some even started to cry. Konstantin said that it was a very touching and "eureka" moment for the teens and seniors alike. These relationships have taught the entire community that age and negative stereotypes don't matter, and also taught everyone involved that the value that the connection with seniors, teens and neighbors of all ages can offer each other is priceless.

RAHWAY

For over three decades, the Rahway Food for Friends volunteers have not only fed hungry friends of all ages in Rahway, but have dedicated themselves to feed -- and clothe -- the whole person.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Nonprofit Organization

Rahway Food for Friends

Award accepted by Patricia Carter, President

Recognition for

starting simply and growing exponentially to abate the hunger of people's bodies and souls

In February 1991, June Koch, a congregant at Rahway's Second Presbyterian Church, asked "What are we doing to feed the hungry in the City of Rahway?" simply suggesting the church offer "food for friends" to combat local hunger.

Since then, for over thirty years, Rahway Food for Friends (RFFF) has fed the community's hungry, homeless, needy families, children, and babies via its food distribution programs on a weekly, monthly, and emergency basis. It is comprised solely of volunteers from local churches and community organizations who work under the radar, quietly, on their own, behind the scenes, to prepare and distribute food so no one goes hungry. They are supported by regular community donations from churches, organizations, and individuals.

In a little over 23 years, RFFF changed and grew from a small volunteer effort, to a local food bank, to, ultimately, in May 2014, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

As the number of people in crisis has increased, so has hunger and the demand for supplemental food. From 16 "guests" at the first soup and sandwich offering, RFFF today feeds a full meal to about 140 people encompassing all age groups — seniors, families with and without children, disabled, walk-ins, those who are hungry, and many who are homeless.

Over 70 volunteers come faithfully to serve those in need. Meals are prepared by volunteers from various churches and organizations. At month's end, they provide as many as 200 Rahway families with a bag containing one week's worth of food -- as well as, oftentimes, clothing. Food from the Emergency Food Pantry is given out weekly by special arrangement.

Seeking to "feed the whole person," they also provide educational information on nutrition, social services, public assistance, and other available resources through literature and referrals. In the spirit of their tradition, today they not only ask "What are we doing to feed our city's hungry?," they continue to seek to serve, asking "Can we do more?"

SCOTCH PLAINS / FANWOOD

Adrienne Robertiello (Mountainside/Scotch Plains) works to eliminate stigmas and promote understanding in the special needs/autism arenas, working to change the paradigm as she educates us that at any moment any one of us can become disabled, or rather, she points out, "differently able."

Unity Award for Special Achievement

Adrienne Robertiello, Special Health Care Educator & Autism Educator Childrens Specialized Hospital

Recognition for

shifting society's perception so that the "differently able" can be uplifted to have a voice and opportunity in an inclusive, accessible, and equitable community

Adrienne Robertiello is an educator, a spokesperson, an integrator, and a warrior. In her roles in and relationships with the Children's Specialized Hospital, Seton Hall University, the Township of Scotch Plain's Persons With Disabilities Coordinator, Union County's special education schools, or in any of her other roles, the common thread of her work and her message is simple and consistent: the disabled are simply "differently able."

Adrienne informs people of what they may not know about the *differently able* population and what their needs are in order to navigate their community. She gives voice to the disabled members of our society, and spreads awareness while providing them with information and access to resources.

She noted that she identifies as disabled and it is her mission to engage and enlighten others to experience what it is like to be disabled so they can contribute to the uplifting of those who truly are disabled and offer them opportunities and bring them to the table -- so they too can be active participants of life despite being *differently able*. Being *differently able* should not preclude them from having the opportunity to participate in their community. Conversely, every community should offer opportunities that are welcoming to all, including through ADA compliance.

Her lived experience as a person with a disability and a parent of an adult child with multiple disabilities shapes her worldview. This viewpoint provides her with a meaningful connection with the efforts and outcomes of her work.

Adrienne's lesson learned to us might be, "You don't know what you don't know." Our society lives in an "able" mindset, but at any time, by age, by accident, anyone of us can become disabled, that is, *differently able*.

Through her work she helps people understand that everyone is *differently able*, that there is value to all of us despite our abilities, and everyone should have access to every opportunity. Sharing this message by removing fear helps to create an environment of inclusivity and equity -- despite ability -- that is "with, by, and for ALL people."

Adrienne also believes that, although you don't know what you don't know, once you do know, you have a responsibility to use this new knowledge. And now that we all know, it is our obligation, in our society, to do exactly that.

UNION

Greg Muller (Union) bravely shares himself, his story, and his journey to eliminate the stigmas and promote understanding of mental illness, so we all grow stronger together. In addition to volunteering as a team member for the specialized Crisis Intervention Training for law enforcement officers and mental health professionals, in which he is a star presenter, he also addresses college and high school students and other community groups.

Unity Award for Special Achievement

Greg Muller, Union County Crisis Intervention Training Team Member

Recognition for

*bravely sharing himself and his story so we can eliminate stigmas, promote understanding,
and all grow stronger together*

Greg Muller has suffered from a serious mental illness since childhood. He first came to the attention of former Union County Assistant Prosecutor Maureen O'Brien when he was a defendant in a criminal case. She made the decision to reject his application to the mental health jail diversion program, which would have exchanged jail time for mental health treatment, as his offense was not related to his mental illness. Greg ultimately served his sentence in state prison, which included treatment.

Upon his release, Greg attended a Union County National Alliance on Mental Illness event, at which two Linden police officers were also present. When Greg learned that the cops were attending, he wanted to go home. The Union County Crisis intervention Team (CIT) is forever grateful that he decided to walk through that door. At that event, Greg developed a friendship with the officers that exists to this day. As a result, he eventually agreed to tell his story, not just of incarceration, but what it's like to live with a serious and persistent mental illness.

For the past thirteen years, three times a year, the CIT training gives local law enforcement officers and mental health professionals an up-close-and-personal look at the issues that arise from mental illness, behavioral health, and developmental disabilities, to help them better respond to crisis calls and safely and effectively provide the individual with the help that is needed.

For the past eight years, Greg has volunteered to share his story. He is always the highlight of the class, and encourages questions. No topic is off limits. He freely answers even the most intimate and personal questions to help officers improve their interactions with individuals with mental illness. His contribution is amazing because of his personal journey. Greg has committed himself to educate the public about mental illness, thereby reducing the stigma. The CIT instructors highly commend him knowing that he struggles as much as he does, and are immensely thankful to him for rising to the challenge of volunteering to help with this class - as well as the police recruit classes-- particularly given his past experience with the criminal justice system. Rather than being bitter, Greg has become an inspiration to all.

Along the way, Greg has developed a passion for helping others. When not sharing his experiences, he shares his time by working with a volunteer organization at Kean University, *Be The Change*, feeding the homeless in Newark, working on a community garden, and other efforts to assist those in need. Greg truly deserves our respect, and our thanks.

WESTFIELD

In his four-years at his specialized high school, senior Michael Richards has excelled academically, but his gift to the school's students and staff is his social excellence that leaves positive energy, joy, and always encouragement and a helping hand in its wake.

Unity Award for Achievement by a Student

Michael Richards, Lamberts Mill Academy

Recognition for

*always looking out for others, ready to provide needed aid or support
with a smile and a reassuring and kind-hearted approach that leave positive energy and joy in their wake*

Lamberts Mill Academy is an exceptional school for students from Union County who need a specialized learning environment that provides a traditional high school environment in a non-traditional program. The students are as diverse in their needs as they are in their backgrounds.

As such, the learning environment is collaborative and engaging, encouraging the students to think critically as an individual, while also communicating effectively as a team.

The school staff and culture encourage each student to function with integrity, and demonstrate a respect for themselves as well as others outside the school walls.

Although academic achievement is important, and Michael has certainly worked hard and earned good grades, we honor Michael tonight for his special blend of assistance and support that he has provided to his fellow classmates through the years. A "Good Samaritan," he is always ready to assist. He is someone who can inspire you, who you can laugh with, or just someone you know you can count on to help see you through. Michael is someone you would want to know and call your friend.

Wherever you are in the school, and no matter if you are a staff member or fellow classmate, Michael is always kind-hearted, welcoming, and looking at what he can do to help. If there is a door to be opened, Michael's got it, asking you how you are doing as you walk through.

Michael is not only always willing to help someone else out, but he is on the lookout to see if someone is struggling. If someone's technology isn't working, he is the first to notice and go to assist. No matter what it is, he will be right there to work through the problem, while also reassuring you "no worries, we've got this, we'll get through this together." He is always supportive and positive, no matter the task or situation he is facing.

Michael's spirit and energy is amazing because it is just organic for him -- it is just who he is. The first thing he gives you is his wonderful smile that just draws you in and lifts you up. He brightens the room, and that brightness doesn't just last for that one moment... he leaves you with a feeling of connection and positive spirit. No matter what is happening in your day, he will bring you joy that stays with you all day.

UNION COUNTY

Detective Alex Lopez has piloted the magnificent Safe Place program throughout all of Union County's 21 municipalities, that identifies a place of safety and assistance for a target or victim seeking refuge from an attack -- particularly one involving bias and hate -- until help can arrive.

Unity Award for Achievement in Law Enforcement

Detective Alex R. Lopez, Special Prosecutions Unit, Union County Prosecutor's Office

Recognition for

advocating for Union County to a respectful and caring place that stands only for inclusion, equality, and justice

Every person can probably recall a tragedy that evokes a strong emotion when something coaxes it back into your mind. For Detective Alex Lopez -- currently assigned to the Union County Prosecutor's Office Special Prosecutions Unit, it was when he began to research the Safe Place program, that he learned of the 1999 story of a young man who died because a NYC grocery store owner would not let him stay in his store while he was trying to escape his attackers. When he left the store, his attackers slashed his throat. He did not make it to the hospital in time. The violent attack was motivated by bias and hate.

Introduced in 2015 by the Seattle Police Department, the free Safe Place program is taking root nationwide. A simple decal in the front window of an establishment identifies it as a Safe Place for a victim -- particularly one targeted from bias or hate -- to seek refuge until the police can be notified and arrive. A liaison has been identified for every school, and is also involved in helping to combat school bullying.

Union County launched its own version in 2022. Detective Lopez firmly believes that no matter who you are, you should be treated with care, dignity, and respect by the entire community, including law enforcement. With his interpersonal skills, his dedication, and his tenacity in its implementation, Union County became the first county in the country to collectively execute the program, with all 21 municipalities participating in the program.

Given the craziness of what is happening in some of the states in our country today, it is worth reiterating that no one should have to live or walk in fear simply for being exactly who they are. We are proud to stand for equality and justice, especially as it relates to cultural diversity and inclusion in our society.

We salute and thank the Prosecutor's Office, for bringing this important program to Union County and letting the world know where we stand on bias and hate crimes. But tonight we honor Detective Alex Lopez for making that possible and for doing it in such a big way. We applaud his continued efforts to support the municipalities as they grow this program in the entirety of the Union County community, signing on local businesses, community and social organizations, and schools, to create a broad network of designated safe places for victims who are targeted for reasons of bias and hate, to combat the epidemic of bias and hate crimes within Union County, and, in that fight, to firmly take a strong stand.

UNION COUNTY

Detective Dariusz Tokarz left no stone unturned in quickly assembling and seeing to the greatly-expanded delivery of much needed aid for the Ukraine following the Russian invasion.

Unity Award for Special Achievement

Detective Dariusz Tokarz, Union County Prosecutor's Office

Recognition for

a magnificent performance to coalesce a network in the name of humanity

It is one thing to come up with an idea to help someone. It is certainly another to accomplish what grows into a huge undertaking with a lot of twists and turns once you set out down that path. Someone who enthusiastically and tirelessly committed himself to a tiny idea that took on a life of its own and saw it through with magnificent results is Union County Prosecutor's Office Detective Dariusz Tokarz.

Sparked by the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, Detective Tokarz immediately started a humanitarian effort to provide one ship's container of necessary and greatly needed supplies to the Ukrainian people. Ultimately, the envisioned one container became four containers which held over 120,000 pounds of aid which were transported to Elizabethport to begin the final legs of their journey to the Ukrainian people.

Detective Tokarz spearheaded the county-wide effort to spread the word, set up donation points, organize supporting organizations and individual volunteers, collect the donations, arrange for packaging and shipping, sort and pack them, and ship them out, as well as managing the details to have the goods first delivered overseas to Poland and ultimately delivered to the Ukraine.

The primary items requested for adults and children included first aid supplies, toiletries and hygiene products; tools, masks, gloves, flashlights, batteries, sewing supplies, paper products, and baby products including formula and diapers. These and other items were collected throughout Union County at local law enforcement offices. Everything was gathered and taken to the Union County Police Department garage in Westfield, where items were sorted and packed into boxes.

Supporters and volunteers assisting in this huge undertaking included Union County Prosecutor's Office staff, municipal police departments, fire departments, the FBI, St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church of Elizabeth, and St. Hedwig Roman Catholic Church of Elizabeth.

Once items were sorted and packaged, they were transported to Doma Export Co. Inc., located in Linden, where the volunteers loaded the boxed goods into the shipping containers. DOMA Export generously provided the boxes and shipping containers.

We salute Detective Tokarz' heartfelt motivation, his tireless efforts to make this happen, and his magnificent performance orchestrating the entire operation which provided help, and hope, to the Ukrainian citizens who so desperately need both.

UNION COUNTY

Over her 31-year career, recently retired Union County Deputy Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik changed the game on a county AND state level for youth victims and “differently-abled” individuals on one side of the spectrum, and criminal offenders on the other.

Unity Award for Special Achievement

Deputy Assistant Prosecutor Doreen Yanik (ret.), Union County Prosecutor’s Office

Recognition for

*changing the game for youth victims, differently able individuals,
and criminal offenders in our county, our state, and one day, our world*

Thirty-one years ago, Doreen Yanik was sworn in as a Union County Assistant Prosecutor. Through the years, she oversaw numerous investigations and trials in the units she worked in, then supervised numerous Assistant Prosecutors in several roles. She also became a highly-regarded and much-sought-after instructor training both active law enforcement officers and Police Academy recruits in many of these disciplines, most often for game-changing initiatives.

Her life’s work in the Union County Prosecutor’s Office was literally a game-changer for everyone she worked on behalf of, but most notably child abuse victims; juvenile offenders; and *differently abled* individuals dealing with serious and persistent mental illness - especially those on the autism spectrum -- as well as those suffering from co-occurring disorders such as substance addiction. Not only did she change the game in Union County, she influenced how law enforcement and the Judiciary interact with these individuals statewide.

As Supervisor of the Child Abuse and Sex Crimes Units, she sought justice for young children who had been sexually and/or physically abused. As an instructor, she taught law enforcement the best practices to interview young child victims.

As a prosecuting attorney and supervisor of the Juvenile Justice Unit, Doreen co-chaired key County and State committees targeting the reduction of juvenile detention and recidivism. Her work with County partners involved in the areas of youth, law enforcement, and the Judiciary led to the launch of two intervention initiatives. The Union County Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) provided in-community care for juveniles as an alternative to detention. The Evening Reporting Center provided juveniles a safe space to socialize, engage in athletic activities, and receive tutoring and counseling. Her committee work also included exploring systemic racial disparities in detention and outcomes, with prevention as an end goal.

In 2010, she addressed the National Action Network convention in Washington D.C. to discuss the successes realized in Union County through the tireless efforts of the Union County Juvenile Committee stakeholders. The following year, she received the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s JDAI Champion Award recognizing her efforts in reforming New Jersey’s Juvenile Justice System. She went on to train judicial representatives from other states to assist in efforts to replicate this juvenile program.

As Supervisor of the Union County Prosecutor’s Office Special Offenders Unit, working with Trinitas Hospital and Bridgeway Rehabilitation caseworkers, she created a Jail Diversion Program for offenders suffering from serious and persistent mental illness. *(continued)*

This program allowed offenders charged with mostly non-violent offenses to be released from jail and set up with an intensive in-community case plan designed to meet their specific mental health needs. Recidivism decreased, and there was significant success following treatment and after-care. She guided other counties to establish their own mental health programs, and was appointed to the Union County Mental Health Board.

Next up was ensuring that offenders suffering from mental health and a co-occurring disorders, such as drug addiction, were also eligible for the Jail Diversion Program. Partnering with various drug treatment programs, she led the expansion of the program which enabled these individuals to be effectively treated for both disorders and to avoid incarceration through compliance with an individualized case plan and assigned caseworker.

Doreen testified before the New Jersey Governor’s Task Force on the handling of defendants suffering from mental illness and the potential for creating a dedicated mental health court. Union County’s Jail Diversion Program and “Mental Health Court” were viewed as THE model to be replicated by other County Prosecutors’ Offices throughout the State.

As a certified Crisis Intervention Team member, she participated in mental health training of both county and statewide law enforcement. She spearheaded the effort to expand mental health training to specifically include interactions with persons with autism. Following a well-attended statewide law enforcement training presented by a nationally renowned autism expert, Dennis Debbaudt, two additional two-day statewide trainings were added. Along with UCHRC Award recipient Adrienne Robertiello of Children’s Specialized Hospital and retired Elizabeth Police Officer Joe Carratala, they petitioned the New Jersey Police Training Commission to add this training to the curriculum. They triumphed, and for over a decade this incredibly valuable autism training has been added as part of recruit and in-service offerings.

The Criminal Justice Reform Act, which went into effect 2017, was a fundamental change in how defendants and their cases are processed in the New Jersey Courts, to ensure that persons are not incarcerated pending disposition of their criminal charges simply because they are indigent. As the Prosecutor's Office Trial Supervisor, Doreen was heavily involved in ensuring that the new law was being enforced properly and equitably, as the Office's representative on the Union County Criminal Justice Reform Committee, writing the Office protocol, and delivering comprehensive law enforcement training to all County law enforcement agencies.

Doreen received her undergraduate degree from Seton Hall University and subsequently graduated Magna Cum Laude from its School of Law. She was a Judicial Law Clerk for Union County's Honorable Walter R. Barisonek, J.S.C. She is a wife, and mother of two beautiful sons. She currently serves as the Parliamentarian of the Union County Bar Association Board.

Her retirement on February 1st of this year did not put an end to her work or her efforts. She is hoping to volunteer to bring a Special Needs Registry to Union County, and renew her partnership with Adrienne Robertiello of Children's Specialized Hospital to expand safety education for our special needs and *differently able* population. We are all the better because of Doreen Yanik, her amazing skills, and her lifelong commitment to seek treatment and positive alternatives, and to ensure equality and justice for all.

UNION COUNTY

The 160 employees of the Union County Division of Emergency Services, Union County Police Department, and the Union County Department of Public Safety, which includes the Health Department and Medical Reserve Corp, were recognized for their widespread collaborative, compassionate effort and singular dedication to lead Union County through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and for answering the call every day without question, without pause, and without fail.

Unity Award for Achievement in Public Service

**Union County Department of Public Safety
Union County Division of Emergency Services
Union County Police Department**

Awards accepted by

Union County Police Department Officer-In-Charge Martin Mogensen

Recognition for

*a widespread collaborative, compassionate effort and singular dedication
to lead Union County through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis*

The description of why we are honoring these Union County organizations for their outstanding response and contributions during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic is easy to define, and encompasses so many people doing so many things it is seemingly hard to grasp. But there is no doubt that during that time of crisis for everyone in Union County — from individuals and families to businesses and organizations — every individual in these organizations worked together to navigate uncharted stormy water and winds to deliver us to the relative safety of calmer waters on the other side.

Tonight, we are specifically honoring all of the Union County employees who worked during COVID-19 in these three County units: The Department of Public Safety, directed by Andrew Moran; and within that department, the Division of Emergency Services/Office of Emergency Management, under the direction of Christopher Scaturro, and the Union County Police Department, under the direction of Chief J. Chris Debbie, all of whom retired during this post-COVID-19 year.

The overall mission of these departments is really singular: to ensure the safety and security of the residents of our county, albeit with a different focus and path to get there. Other units within this triad include hazardous materials, homeland security preparedness, the health department, ambulances, and mutual aid resources such as Fire and EMS, and the Union County Regional Communications Center. The medical examiner, too, though a small office, made a tremendous contribution.

Also vital in the effort was the county's Medical Reserve Corp, made up of group of health care volunteers including nurses, EMTs, pediatricians, and other support staff. The County does not employ any medical staff, so the Medical Reserve Unit was crucial in the early stages and throughout, and served as an integral part of the county's COVID testing sight.

The UCHRC is proud that the Union County Medical Reserve Corp was awarded the Unity Achievement Award for Public Service in 2013. It was almost prophetic that they were recognized for volunteering, oftentimes in danger's way, to improve and ensure the health, well-being, and quality of life for our citizens. Their participation in the actual testing -- definitely putting them in harm's way -- is just who they are and what they do. We salute them again this evening, under the auspices of the award to the Union County Department of Public Safety.

Every member of those organizations has valuable skills and a dedication to service that contributes to their individual and combined success. Their concerted partnership and pro-active approach to dealing with any situation or incident -- in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic -- enabled them to efficiently and effectively respond to the threat and its resulting potential fallout, and to achieve optimum results for every aspect of the county, which was no small feat.

They heard some of the first rumblings, as we all did, on the national news. When the first cases started in Union County, each one was big news. The first case occurred in mid-March, in Berkeley Heights. The second case, strangely enough, was Andrew Moran's brother, who commuted to his job in New York by train. Yep, he tested positive.

The Division of Emergency Services has incredibly detailed plans in place for a myriad of natural and man-made disasters. Division Director Chris Scaturo was already on guard since early February, gathering information, planning, gearing up -- literally and figuratively, and spreading the word.

They were ready, and participated in state conference calls and also heard from health officials about the possible issues the pandemic would cause. When they realized how serious this was, they immediately geared up for the worst case scenario and see to all of the details, because that's just what they do to help.

One of the first priorities was working with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management for resource allocation. Amongst the biggest issues to overcome was the acquisition of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) -- suits, masks and gloves. Union County was very successful as they partnered with vendors who could acquire goods quickly, and worked out the logistics to keep the first responders -- and eventually the Kean COVID testing site -- stocked with everything that was needed. The private sector also kicked in, especially dentists and other medical clinics, providing equipment and PPE. Titos stopped producing vodka and started producing hand sanitizer. Ford started producing face shields. There were so many people involved in the effort to do what they could do.

Chris Scaturo likened it to the dedicated and remarkable September 11th response, when everyone came together for a common purpose and did not think about anything except simply getting the supplies to the people who needed it. It was remarkable how dedicated everyone was to one singular cause.

When an allocation of equipment came in, it would be released to various Union County municipalities, institutions, and critical infrastructures components, including hospitals, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. Ambulance garages were turned into supply store rooms. From the emergency management side, it was really providing the logistics and support to the health department.

Besides managing the emergency, there was also the multi-pronged response and huge undertaking by the Emergency Medical Service team. As part of their normal duties as a county ambulance service that provided backup support to the municipal squads, they would normally respond to approximately 25 calls a day, treat the person, put them in an ambulance, and bring them to the hospital. Once COVID hit, and some municipal squads were overwhelmed, their daily call volume doubled. They added extra staff and extra ambulances to meet the demand. Their challenges were further complicated because the hospitals were so overwhelmed that turnaround times were longer than normal, which tied up those resources. Everyone was overwhelmed and trying to do the best they could to meet the demand.

One of the first concerns that cropped up was the Union County St. Patrick's Day Parade, attended by thousands of participants and visitors. One hundred years ago, the spread of the Spanish flu was accelerated by Philadelphia's St. Patrick's Day Parade, and fortunately the organizers cancelled the popular event.

By that time, the number of cases started to increase, and the County set about opening up a testing center. Kean University was selected as the site. Then the work started to make the site functional. Led by these departments, every possible contributor throughout the county was onboard and contributing in some way.

Law enforcement, including the Prosecutor's and Sheriff's Offices and municipal departments, were led by Chief Chris Debbie and the Union County Police Department, who helped with the logistics and actually setting up the site. That was no small task, either. They worked closely with Union County's Department of Parks and Recreation on the actual site construction, including tents, signage, generators, lighting, cooling fans in the summer, heaters in the winter, and fans just to keep the air flowing. Of course, the first day the site opened for testing, it was snowing and raining. But everything was in place, and everyone was prepared and knew just what to do. The Union County Police Department also oversaw both traffic and site security, and worked with everyone to coordinate all of those efforts and the significant staffing needs and schedules.

Andrew Moran of the Department of Public Safety oversaw everything that was happening across the board, while his staff kept very busy with overseeing the testing registration and other site logistics as well.

While OEM was handling the logistics and overseeing the entire process, it was the person at the COVID testing site assigned to be the intake commander who was responsible for overseeing the entire operation, and was the “boots on the ground” person, working side by side with people to ensure we were getting it done and met the demand. He coordinated with County administration and outside agencies. The commander reported back to OEM everything that was going on, including if equipment, testing kits, or staff were needed.

Again, they were able to overcome everything quickly because of their relationships with the vendors and the ongoing and significant support from the county and state.

While the Office of Emergency Management had the task of bringing everyone together, coordinating, and supporting the operations, they are the first to affirm that it was everyone, in every department, and people throughout Union County pulling together to get the job done that made it all work, accomplishing so many successful outcomes. Chris Scaturro also noted that part of the success rose from the fact that they treated it like it was a basic large-scale county event, and simply executed their previously established plans for traffic, parking, and the like. The strategies were in place, and everyone already knew what they had to do, before simply going ahead and just doing it.

Although they protected the staff with the proper equipment and training, some of the staff got COVID, but not as many as they anticipated. A 25% positive rate was already worked into the plan. Everyone responded by putting policies in place that changed and evolved as they learned more. Everyone was involved in an ongoing conversation about the pandemic, changing information, the effectiveness of policies and training. That continuous review and exchange of information made an enormous difference in how Union County responded to the pandemic, and enabled everyone, particularly the EMTs, to circumvent numerous issues.

We know that COVID aged a lot of people quickly, and a lot of people became burned out facing such a monumental task. The impacts on the healthcare field can still be felt. The number of people choosing to enter the medical profession, including those seeking to become doctors, nurses, or EMTs have continued to decline, even taking COVID out of the equation.

The leadership of these three departments have each maintained that they give the overwhelming credit to their management teams and staff because each and every one of them stepped up to the plate to meet these enormous challenges. All hands were on deck and every single person did their part. No matter what position or job title, everyone simply asked, “What do you need me to do?” The answer to every request that followed was always, “No problem. I got it.”

Tonight, we simply are saying **THANK YOU** to every single one of them, individually and collectively, for getting an incredible undertaking not only done, but incredibly well done.