

## First Lady Mary Pat Christie Awards \$125,000 in Spirit of Hero Scholarships

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**Trenton, NJ** – First Lady Mary Pat Christie today announced 25 recipients of the 2015 New Jersey Heroes Spirit of a Hero Scholarship during a ceremony at Drumthwacket, the Governor's official residence in Princeton. The \$5,000 scholarships, which emanate from the Heart of a Hero program for military veterans, continues the Christie Administration's commitment to assist New Jersey students pursue post-secondary education opportunities.

"This is our third year for the Spirit of a Hero Scholarship program and I am continually amazed by the character and commitment demonstrated by our young people in taking on serious issues impacting communities throughout New Jersey," said Mrs. Christie. From human trafficking and environmental stewardship to STEM education and programs for individuals with special needs, all of

our applicants and awardees are doing outstanding work to give back and help improve the lives of others. With the Spirit of a Hero Scholarship, we are recognizing and honoring these good deeds while helping these young adults to achieve their career goals. This is a truly inspiring day that represents the best of New Jersey."

Since its inception in 2013 to date, New Jersey Heroes has awarded \$335,000 in scholarship funding to 67 students from across the state through the Spirit of a Hero program.

The 2015 Spirit of a Hero awardees are:



**Faith Adams, Bergenfield High School, Bergenfield (Bergen):** Faith Adams has been an active member of her community for most of her high school career. As a volunteer for Big Brothers Big Sisters, she has mentored young girls in her community, helping them to achieve academic success and overcome bullying. When she is not working with Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Faith volunteers her time at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center. Faith will be attending Fairleigh Dickinson University majoring in the Quest Teacher Preparation Program-BS in Biology this fall.

• **Sankalp Aggarwal, Bridgewater Raritan High School, Bridgewater (Somerset):** Sankalp Aggarwal, also known as Sunny, cofounded the NJ iSTEM Nonprofit Organization to give students an opportunity to apply their school-based knowledge in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. The organization provides opportunities and resources for students to engage in scientific research and engineering projects to experience the real world learning of STEM. Sunny's overall goal is to expand iSTEM into a model that can be applied throughout New Jersey to allow students to achieve a higher level STEM education. Sunny will be attending UC Berkeley in the fall and will be majoring in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

• **Russell Arno Bauer III, Seneca High School, Tabernacle (Burlington):** Russell Bauer had already been involved in church and community service when he decided to become an EMT in 2013. After helping out as an observer, Russell decided to become certified in order to better serve his community. In addition to volunteering over 539 hours to the squad this year alone, Russell serves as a Permanent Student Member on the New Jersey State Board of Education. Russell will either attend Virginia Tech or the Naval Academy Prep School where he will pursue a degree in political science.

• **Madi Beumee, Morris County School of Technology, Denville (Morris):** After being diagnosed with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis in the second grade, Madi Beumee began volunteering with the Arthritis Foundation. When she realized that there were others suffering with symptoms worse than hers, she decided to give back as much as she could. Through numerous fundraisers, walk-a-thons, and musical performances, Madi has raised over \$10,000 for the Arthritis Foundation of New Jersey. Madi will pursue a BFA in Musical Theatre at Syracuse University this fall.

• **Laura Elizabeth Cavanagh, Immaculata High School, Somerville (Somerset):** Laura Cavanagh has been volunteering with her family from an early age. With over 1,500 volunteer hours throughout her high school career, Laura has surpassed her school's record while contributing the most community service hours of any student. She enjoys volunteering her time to help serve those with mental and physical disabilities, and has been honored by the ARC of Somerset County with the "Angels Among Us" award. One of her favorite programs is Higher Achievement

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Program for Handicapped Adults, where she volunteers to take participants on sightseeing trips and other activities. Laura will be attending Seton Hall University this fall to study in the Occupational Therapy/Medical Science program.

- **Kaela Lyn Denno, Mount Olive High School, Flanders (Morris):** After volunteering at the Freedom Horse Therapeutic Riding Farm for over four years, Kaela Denno decided that a sensory trail would be a great addition to the farm's therapy programs. With the help of the owner and president of the farm, she created, developed, and implemented the sensory trail in 85 hours. The trail is a wonderful learning tool for mentally and physically disabled students, and one of Kaela's most rewarding contributions to her community. Kaela will be attending West Virginia University to study dietetics in the fall.
- **Mark Dominguez, Jefferson Township High School, Oak Ridge (Morris):** After learning about the issue of human trafficking as an eighth grader, Mark Dominguez felt compelled to make a difference. He cofounded Project Stay Gold, a nonprofit organization that aims to empower communities with knowledge to fight modern day slavery. The focus of the organization is to educate youth and community members on how to recognize the warning signs of human trafficking activities. Mark will attend Dartmouth College majoring in Economics and International Relations in the fall.
- **Stephanie Harvey, Eastern Regional High School, Voorhees (Camden):** As a freshman, Stephanie Harvey began volunteering in the special needs community on weekends. After seeing some of the special needs clients in her high school, she thought about how she could take her volunteerism a step further. She launched the Lunch Buddies program - a program that matches a special needs student with a "buddy" to eat with during lunch. The response to the program was overwhelming, with over 200 students volunteering on the first day. Stephanie will begin studying Penn State University majoring in Communication Science and Disorders to obtain her Speech-Language Pathology.
- **Gunnar Tyler Henning, Warren Hills Regional High School, Washington (Warren):** When Tyler Henning heard his school district's Special Services Department was looking for a new interactive method to aid special education teachers, he wanted to help. Alongside his computer science teacher, Tyler created Special Education Technology - a specialized program that helps autistic children get involved and excited about their education. This program includes the use of a NAO Robot, a two-foot tall humanoid robot equipped with many advanced robotic capabilities such as speech and face recognition, object tracking, and high-tech human-like kinematics. The program has been presented to other New Jersey school districts and Tyler hopes to see it expand in the near future. He will be attending Carnegie Mellon University this fall to study finance and computer science.
- **Brianna F. Hoody, Bergen County Academies - Academy for Visual and Performing Arts, Hackensack (Bergen):** After witnessing the terror attacks of 9/11 firsthand, Brianna Hoody and her family relocated to New Jersey and felt compelled to give back. Brianna and her family began taking in children without families and providing them with foster care. She is now an advocate for foster care, giving speeches to help try to recruit other families to give back the way her family has for so many years. Brianna plans to study pre-medicine with a minor in music at Ithaca College this fall.
- **Abhiram Karuppur, The Pingry School, Basking Ridge (Somerset):** Suffering from poor eye sight for most of his life, Abhiram has experienced the plight of millions of people whose inability to see has impaired their ability to work. After learning about New Eyes for the Needy, an organization that distributes donated and repurposed glasses around the world at no charge, Abhiram began holding eyeglass collections to help. In addition to gathering more than 400 pairs of glasses, Abhiram volunteers his time at the New Eyes for the Needy sorting facility to ensure the right glasses get to the right people. Abhiram will be studying Chemical Engineering and Economics at Princeton University this fall.
- **Jon Kubricki, Pinelands Regional High School, Little Egg Harbor (Atlantic):** A self-proclaimed 'environmental steward,' Jon Kubricki formed a student community action team called the Pinelands EcoScientists as a freshman. The group's goal is to mitigate deforestation. As part of this process, Jon and his team developed a briquette making mini-press that utilizes biomass waste products for cooking, rather than the wood from trees. So far, 100 of these mini-presses have been constructed and shipped to rural villages and orphanages around the world. Jon plans to receive a dual degree in Nanotechnology and Entrepreneurship Management and Information Technology from Louisiana Tech University.
- **Alexander Louie, Hillsborough High School, Hillsborough (Somerset):** Growing up playing soccer, crew, and tennis, Alex Louie couldn't imagine life without sports. This made it difficult for him to accept that the only athletic opportunity available to his autistic brother was filling water bottles at athletic events. Alex decided to combine his knowledge of developmental disabilities with his passion for sports and formed a tennis camp for children with developmental and learning disabilities around the state. He will most likely be studying at Rutgers University and majoring in Computer Science this fall.
- **Mackenzie Ann Olson, Clearview Regional High School, Mullica Hill (Gloucester):** In 2005, Mackenzie Olson formed Crowns for a Cause, a charity organization that creates volunteer opportunities and brings awareness to other good causes. Crowns for a Cause works to promote a commitment to community service among student peers and their families. One of Mackenzie's favorite projects has been "Operation Piggy Polish" - a nail polish and cosmetics drive for women serving overseas. Mackenzie will study at The College of New Jersey this fall with plans to major in Criminal Justice and minor in Psychology, while following a pre-med track.
- **Katie Alexandria Ramirez, Elizabeth High School - Upper Academy, Elizabeth (Union):** An avid volunteer in her community, Katie Ramirez describes her trip to Thailand to teach English to the Hill Tribe Orphanage as one of her greatest volunteering endeavors. Her work with the orphanage, Boys and Girls Club of Elizabeth, and the Humanitarian Club taught her the importance of education to underprivileged youth. Katie will be the first generation of her family to attend college. She will be studying Biochemistry at the University of Pennsylvania.
- **Luisa Rinaudo, Middletown High School, Middletown (Monmouth):** Having a brother with Down syndrome, Luisa Rinaudo has always felt a special connection with those who are developmentally disabled. Aside from volunteering over 1,000 hours to the special needs community, Luisa started a program called Just Dance - a bi-annual dance for people with special needs. Just Dance not only provides a wonderful experience for those with special needs, but also helps them with their social skills and confidence as they grow. Luisa will begin studying at Seton Hall University this fall, majoring in education with a focus in speech language pathology.
- **Elijah Christian Rodriguez, Christian Brothers Academy, Lincroft (Monmouth):** Elijah has been involved in a number of weekly volunteer activities for over 6 years. From delivering bagels weekly to a senior citizen community to stocking shelves at his local food pantry, Elijah sets out to make a difference. He describes one of his most memorable accomplishments as organizing a Hurricane Sandy Relief Walk, which encouraged his school to get involved annually in Make A Difference Day efforts. After raising over \$8,000, the Hurricane Sandy Relief Walk was honored at the Make A Difference Day Awards with an additional \$10,000 for the Church of Christ in Union Beach. Elijah will attend Harvard College where he will be on a Pre-Medicine track.
- **Tomas Roberto Sanchez, Highland Park High School, Highland Park (Middlesex):** Sharing a love for soccer with his best friend from Nigeria, Tomas Sanchez wanted to give back to those in less fortunate areas who don't have the same opportunities to play sports. For that reason, Tomas and his friend Tobi created the Kicks for Kids Foundation - an organization that collects and donates cleats to underprivileged kids in Nigeria. In addition, he has spent every Saturday for the past 4 years volunteering with the Buddy Ball Foundation, teaching children with developmental disabilities to play soccer. Tomas will be attending The Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania this fall.
- **Benjamin Schragger, Hopewell Valley Central High School, Pennington (Mercer):** After spending time in the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia following a Crohn's Disease diagnosis, Benjamin Schragger wondered how he could make the hospital stay better for kids who could not leave. An avid sports card collector, Ben researched and discovered the Cards2Kids foundation - a charity that donates sports cards to children. At the age of 14, he was named the organization's first New Jersey ambassador, and to this day has personally delivered over 400,000 sports

cards throughout the Garden State, collecting more than 700,000 cards overall. After his significant contribution, he was appointed CEO of the charity in 2014. Benjamin will be studying Sports Management at Rice University this fall.

• **Emily Jane Shapiro, James Caldwell High School, West Caldwell (Essex):** Emily Shapiro founded the Kids Serving Kids Chapter of Northern New Jersey - a community service program that collects and recycles tennis rackets for underserved youth. Over the past couple of years, Emily has collected over 300 tennis racquets to give to the children of the Boys and Girls Club of Clifton who want to learn how to play tennis but cannot afford the equipment. Emily continued this endeavor by volunteering her time to then teach the kids how to play tennis, a skill she hopes they will keep with them forever. Emily will be studying at Bucknell University studying Early Childhood Education this fall.

• **Maya Sicherer, Fair Lawn High School, Fair Lawn (Bergen):** Maya has been volunteering for children and adults with cognitive and developmental disabilities since she was in the sixth grade. After working one-on-one with an autistic boy through the Friendship Circle Program and seeing the impact the social interaction had on him, Maya began a program in her school that allows students to spend their lunch period with students with special needs. She has also been volunteering with Camp Snowflake/Sunshine since 2009, a summer/winter camp for developmentally impaired adults and children. Maya will be attending Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences this fall.

• **Lindsay Testa, Ridgewood High School, Ridgewood (Bergen):** At the age of fourteen, Lindsay and a friend founded the ALIVE Heroes Challenge to help children whose parents had been directly affected by the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The organization sells bracelets to fundraise for the Bob Woodruff Foundation, whose mission is to provide resources and support to injured service members, veterans, and their families. This also includes children of service members who are deeply affected by war when their parent serves. Lindsay will be attending the Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science at Columbia University this fall.

• **Sarah Wolford, Allentown High School, Allentown (Monmouth):** After attending many 'Sweet 16' parties her sophomore year, Sarah began to wonder about the girls and boys who have never experienced a birthday party before. She came up with the concept of Birthday in a Box, where she collects all the items necessary to have a birthday celebration and packs them into a box to ease the burden of purchasing birthday supplies for low income families. She has also been volunteering with Jersey Cares for the past 4 years, a non-profit foundation that organizes volunteer events throughout NJ. Sarah will be attending Loyola University this fall.

• **Ellen Wu, Freehold High School, Freehold (Monmouth):** Ellen Wu had been attending the Hua Xia Chinese School South in Marlboro to learn Mandarin since she was a toddler. Over the years, she spent time with many senior citizens and recent immigrants who were native Mandarin speakers but struggled with English as their second language. So, Ellen decided to begin teaching her very own English class at the school. Her curriculum has developed extensively over the course of 4 years, creating new grammar, vocabulary, and ESL lesson plans to teach every week. Ellen will be attending Northwestern University's Honors Program in Medical Education this fall.

• **Carolina Andrea Zuluaga, Academy of the Holy Angels, Demarest (Bergen):** After discovering the Read to Feed program, Carolina Zuluaga decided to hold various book drives and fundraisers to encourage children to read. Her first fundraiser collected over 1,200 books. Over the past 4 years, she has raised over \$5,500 and collected 6,000 books. Carolina's efforts have helped to establish a community library at the Bergen Family Council Center in Englewood. She has also been volunteering at the Center for Food Action and Union City Music Project every week since 2011. Carolina hopes to continue to serve her community while attending the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania this fall.

New Jersey Heroes worked with the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education and HESAA (Higher Education Student Assistance Authority) to promote the scholarship. This year, more than 700 students applied for the Spirit of a Hero Scholarship.

To be considered for the scholarship, candidates must meet several criteria, including a demonstrated commitment to volunteerism and community contribution; be a New Jersey resident and U.S. Citizen; submission of a high school transcript and a letter of recommendation from a current teacher or advisor; be in good academic standing with their secondary school and enroll as a student at an accredited college/university or a vocational training school in the 2015-2016 school year (Fall or Spring Semester).

New Jersey Heroes is an initiative First Lady Mary Pat Christie began in 2010 to showcase the positive and unique ways people and organizations are impacting New Jersey and their communities. To nominate a hero, go to [newjerseyheroes.org](http://newjerseyheroes.org) and follow the application instructions to submit the person you believe is a true New Jersey Hero.

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