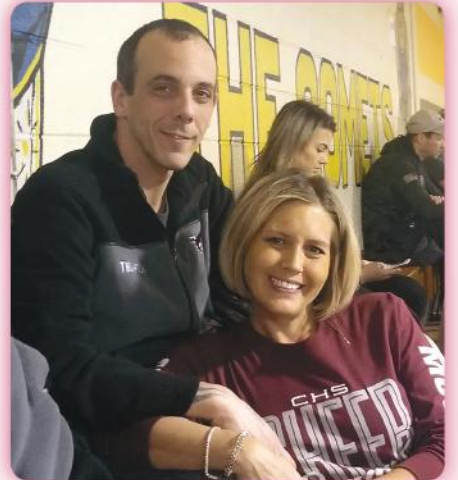
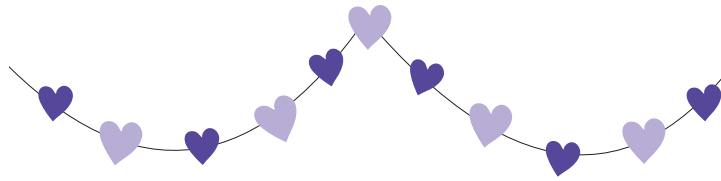


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27 OF Love Stories YEARS



With Love...

From the Editor
Tom Hawrylko, Sr.

CLIFTON

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Love, Marriage & Family



From the top of the 1999 cover: Nancy Leonard and Katie Mei; the Lope family: Donna, Roger, Conrad, Kimberly and Kelly; Roy and Nancy Garretson; Peter and Helen Abbate; the Reilly family: Jeff, Kristen, Scott, Brian and Diane.

From the top of the 2026 cover: Joseph and Maria Santos; Robert Ferreri and Alexandra Constandinou; Patrick Kavanagh and Stacey Corbo; Cynthia and Christopher Thompson; Ralph Danna and Stephanie Lescano; John and Alyssa DeGraaf.

We came up with a great idea 27 years ago: let's write about love, marriage and family in February! So in January, 1999, we put out the word that we were looking for couples willing to share photos and stories about how they met, and how they keep love alive. Friends and neighbors were asked to share their stories and photos. Some had to be cajoled; others were happy to share. But when the magazine hit the streets, we knew we plucked a heart string.

Twenty-seven years later, and nearly 200 love stories shared, the concept is still a reader favorite, as the edition you are about to read will surely attest.

So in tribute to how it began, we turn back the clock to present our first "Love Edition" cover, at left. Opening the February, 1999 magazine, writer Barbara Levi James stated: "This month *Clifton Merchant* looks at the institutions of Love, Marriage and Family. Long-time marriages, stay-at-home dads, single moms and other approaches to raising a family are covered in this edition."

Beyond those on the 1999 cover, Barbara introduced us to Tony and Patti Ryan, an Albion neighbor whose job was to keep the house in order as Patti was the breadwinner at an NYC law firm. There were also tales of long-time marriages and Mustang sweethearts, couples who worked together and stories on adoption. Later in October, 1999, President Bill Clinton proclaimed National Adoption Month, bringing more focus to how families can grow. To those who have shared stories over the decades, thank you. Now turn the pages, and read Love Stories 2026, sealed with a kiss by our writers, Ariana Puzzo and Robert Niessen.

Clifton Merchant Magazine CLIFTON

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TWO Decades Strong

All Love Stories by Ariana Puzo



As far as first dates go, it wasn't quite "make or break" for Ralph Danna and Stephanie Lescano. The couple already had positive first impressions of each other, so going out to Breaker Billiards on Rt. 46 only reaffirmed what they felt.

Their first encounter took place at McDonald's on Central Ave. in Passaic. Stephanie had just moved to the country from Lima, Peru and was working there while taking classes. Ralph, who recently returned from Iraq, had begun working as a police dispatcher in Passaic.

"He would come in there to get his favorite meal," laughed Stephanie, 39. "A Big Mac and chicken nuggets."

Ralph, 45, recalled how Stephanie immediately caught his eye. He soon started making more frequent lunch breaks at that location.

"I was only going there for my lunch break, and I love McDonald's, so I didn't expect anything more of it," he said. "I think I gave her my phone number, but first I asked how old she was."

"I lied," Stephanie chimed in. She was three weeks shy of 18. "I knew from talking to people here that, if you're not 18, people can't go out with you."

But, now? Those three weeks pale in comparison to their nearly 20 years of marriage. Ralph and Stephanie will celebrate the anniversary of their courtroom marriage on April 12, which is the one that was officiated by former Mayor

James Anzaldi.

But, unlike many couples, they have another date to celebrate. The couple were wed in Sacred Heart Parish on Dec. 22, 2006 by the late Reverend Monsignor Julian Bennett Varettoni, who at that point no longer performed ceremonies.

The couple only dated for a year and a half before they wed.

"I remember we went to my grandma and said, 'We're getting married on Wednesday' and my family asked, 'Are you pregnant?'" reminisced Stephanie, who wasn't pregnant. "It just felt like the perfect timing for us to be married and to be together all the time."

Where They Started

Stephanie had visited the United States prior to her immigration at age 17, but she only officially moved to the country once she had finished school.

Stephanie is the youngest child of Luis and Maritza Lescano with two older sisters, Melissa, who still lives in Lima, and Sheila, who lives in Madrid. In the U.S., Stephanie lived with her grandma, Lidia Lescano, in Clifton. She enrolled in Passaic County Community College and worked hard.

"When I met her, most girls I knew over here who

were 18 were worried about going to the mall and picking out shoes,” said Ralph. “They didn’t have their lives together, but she was very real and had two jobs. She seemed very responsible ... and she was fun to hang around with.”

Eighteen years ago this month, Stephanie began working at Marrocco Memorial Chapel. She is the office manager and credits that opportunity to her in-laws’ close relationship to the manager and director James J. Marrocco.

“I’ve worked at a few places,” said Stephanie, “but I’ve been with Jim for that long. And Ralph’s known Jim all of his life.”

Before moving with his family to Florida, Ralph was a Cliftonite. He attended School 12, Sacred Heart School at the corner of Clifton and Randolph Ave., and then CHS for his freshman year.

He grew up with parents Ralph Jr. and Serena (Giaconia) Danna and younger sister, Daniella. Both he and Stephanie were sporty in their youth. While she grew up playing volleyball before she moved, he was part of Villa Pizza’s Little League team before he left our city.

“Every team had a sponsor, and they seemed to be my



Ralph Danna and Stephanie Lescano with sons Ralph IV and Randy.

team every year,” Ralph chuckled.

He entered the US Army after high school, serving for five and a half years. Ralph was stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, but he was deployed twice to Colombia and Bosnia. In 2003, he took a job with the Department of Defense and spent three months working in Iraq as a civilian Special Security Officer.

Fast-forward to the present day, Ralph retired



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as a Captain last March after spending 20 years with the Passaic Police Department. Since last August, Ralph has worked in Hackensack as a school safety coordinator.

When he considers the options that he had after leaving the Army, not to mention how these options led to him and Stephanie meeting, Ralph is thankful to one of his mentors.

“The reason I went into the Army was I wasn’t really thrilled to go into college right out of high school,” said Ralph. “When I got my permanent assignment at Fort Bragg, my first officer told me to get in the car and drove me to the Education Center so I could sign up for college. That was Captain Jeremy Bushyager. I owe him a lot.”

Family First

Stephanie’s first impression of her husband has stood the test of time.

“He pretty much confirmed everything from that first date as far as being nice, sweet, and a very respectful guy,” she said. “But over the years? He’s very generous, understanding, and a loving guy. I could see in those first few dates something that I’ve seen time and time again. He has the biggest heart.”

The couple have lived in Wayne since 2010 with their

sons Ralph IV, 16, and Randy, 13. There’s a consensus that a big relationship strength was and remains being each other’s best friend. It’s part of the reason why they still enjoy spending as much time together as possible.

“It’s important to us that we come home every night and eat dinner together,” said Stephanie. “To do the things that we grew up doing and that are very important to us.”

Balancing each other is another strength, because they’re not exactly the same person.

“If I’m a little off on my thinking or going one way, she balances me out the other way, and vice versa,” said Ralph. “I’d probably go to work with holes in my shirt if she didn’t buy a new one.”

They’ve also had couples that they admire, like Joseph and Dorothy De Liberto. Joseph worked at Marrocco Memorial Chapel as the flower car driver, which led to an enduring friendship even once he no longer worked there. Similarly, Ralph and Joseph served together for many years as pallbearers.

“He and his wife were a beautiful couple. He [always had] wife and marriage jokes,” Stephanie reminisced. “In the last five years that his wife was sick, Joe stopped doing everything to take care of her and to be there with her in their home.”

“I just think they had a beautiful marriage and have a beautiful family,” she added. “I would love to be like them at their ages.”



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Arranging Their *Family's Future*

A strong work ethic and love of flowers laid the first seed for Santos Flowers' success in Bergen and Passaic counties. But what helped make that success meteoric these past four years is the belief held by Joseph and Maria Santos' former employer that they could succeed.

"I think the key was my previous boss, Rafael Cuellar, was always talking to me and saying, 'You guys have the power. You guys are good workers,'" said Joseph Santos, 51. "He treated me as a leader, and I didn't realize at the time, but he has a lot of training for employees."

The Cuellar family's ties to the Passaic and Clifton communities deepened significantly when they took ownership of ShopRite of Passaic in 2005. Cuellar, who's the owner of ShopRite of Passaic/Clifton on Paulison Ave. in Passaic, became someone that Santos sees as a mentor.

That developed during Santos' years in the Floral Department and later working Security, as well as Maria's years up front in the Floral Department.

"He always pushed me to do things. I learned everything [in that job] and then realized how much I learned from him," said Santos. "We learned how to grow as people, because he's a good person, too. He always helped."

Santos Flowers opened the doors for its first location in Garfield in 2021. Their second location opened a year later in Fair Lawn. Santos Flowers 3, located at 453 Lexington Ave., opened this past February right before Valentine's Day. Visit them online at santosflowersnj.com.

"We do great, because we worked in stores and implemented whatever we learned in the past," said Santos. "We also know a lot about our customers, ... and we knew this shop was in a good neighborhood."

And now they're able to continue implementing the values that they experienced under Cuellar at all three locations. Speaking in mid-December, Santos mentioned running into Cuellar at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce's Annual Holiday Party the night prior.



Owners Joseph and Maria Santos with Emily Py and Anita Gonzales.

"He's so happy to see how we've grown the business," said Santos. "He said, 'I'm impressed, because I know you guys and ... I was sure when you guys left that you were going to be OK.' ... He told me that he wants to pass by one of these days in the store to talk ... and it feels so good."

Evolving and Prospering

The Santos' know the flower industry, but they also see flowers as more than a product.

It's a way to share beauty with the community, and it began before their days spent at ShopRite. The flower business originated with them as a small vendor outside of President's Supermarket in Passaic, which was owned by Cuellar's family for 21 years until he sold it just a month before taking over ownership and operation of ShopRite in August of 2005.

"Rafael's father [Evelio] gave me a chance to stay in front of the store. We didn't pay rent. He said, 'We like

to see flowers in the entrance of the supermarket,” said Santos. “‘Stay there for whatever time you need.’ So we stayed [with them] for over 15 years.”

How they stayed with the Cuellars naturally evolved over time. Working at ShopRite was a big shift due to its scale, but Santos emphasized that “we always enjoyed Rafael’s management.” Transitioning to security meant that Santos worked in a different part of the store and he was required to shift his focus, but flowers were never fully out of sight.

“The owner said, ‘We can put your wife in front and you can support her if she needs something, because you know everything,’” said Santos. “During the holidays, I’d leave the office for two to three weeks and work with her in the Floral Department, because it got very busy.”

But busyness has never discouraged Santos. Even in those days, there was always the thought of someday running his own business. Now in the midst of it all, Santos acknowledged the floral industry as being a tough business.

What helps now is having about 20 employees across the three locations. They also understand the ins and outs of working with international companies, which they quickly realized have better quality flowers that “we don’t see in the U.S.”

But there are also newer obstacles. One of them, due to bringing in international products, is the tariffs.



Joseph Santos with Rafael Cuellar and Carlos Media, the PResident and CEO of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of NJ.

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“It’s a big difference. We pay thousands and thousands of dollars more than we used to pay,” said Santos. “The difference, 10% more, I think people don’t believe it. I will often have those conversations with customers, because they ask me that question all the time.”

What matters to the family behind Santos Flowers is making sure to work with their vendors so that the heightened cost doesn’t land on their customers. Local support has made a difference, with Santos saying he was surprised by just how many communities exist within our city.

“As an immigrant from Mexico, I was thinking it was going to be hard to bring the community together. Since opening the business, the Dominican community has always come in and so has the Arab community,” said Santos. “They always buy, and we’re always busy. I’m really humbled that we have all these communities coming together.”

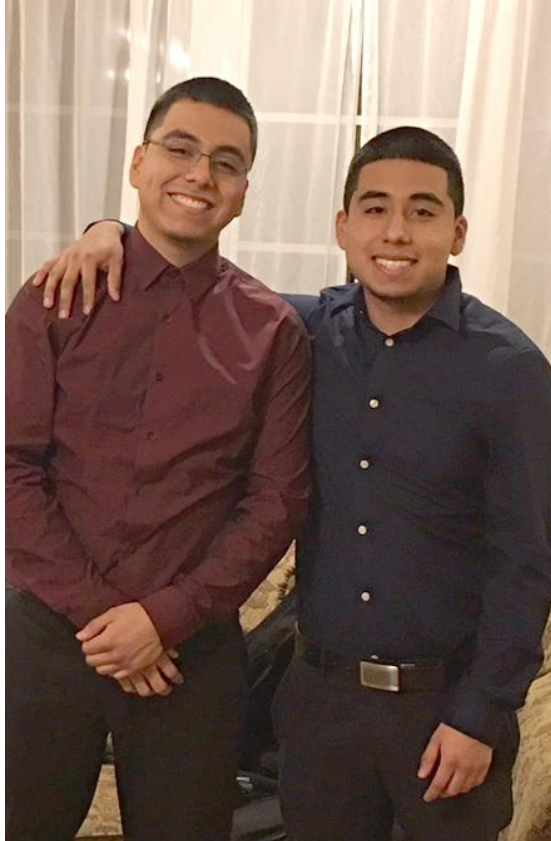
“As a small business, it’s really hard to survive,” Santos added. “There are a lot of businesses closing, because they’re not able to succeed due to the pandemic, the tariffs, or the economy isn’t too good for them. I see a lot of companies closing, which is not good for the state.”

An Eye For Design

The good news is, Santos Flowers is already envisioning expansion.

A fourth shop could come this year and is currently being discussed by the team. The potential locations could be Paterson or close to Woodland Park since they have quite a few customers living in that area. Santos would like to bring the business closer to them, but there are certain things that need to happen first.

“The most important part is training the employees to be ready, because if the business grows quickly and we don’t have personnel, we won’t have the qualifications



Marc and Eric Santos.

and the business won’t run well,” said Santos. “The key is the group that you have. If you have good employees, you will always have more chances to be successful.”

Santos Flowers takes a multi-tiered approach to how they provide their services. A day begins with Santos opening the Fair Lawn shop at 7 am, Maria opening the Lexington Ave. shop, and their son Eric opening the Garfield shop. Santos Flowers is open daily, closing weeknights at 8 pm and weekends at 9 pm.

One of the things that surprises customers most when they walk in is how they manage to keep so many hours.

“Our product is like a service. Some people go to work early in the morning and want to get something but don’t have time to go to the stores at different times,” said

Santos. “There are sometimes people outside in their cars waiting for us to [open] the store.”

Santos typically spends his days floating between the shops, but Maria and Eric are based out of their respective locations. Maria is a designer and trains new designers to accommodate the small business’s growth.

“You won’t have a good flower shop without that,” said Santos.

Both of their sons have worked in the shop over the years. Marc, 30, now lives in Texas but helped Santos run the stores in the beginning prior to discovering his allergies to the plants. Younger son Eric, 27, handles the technology for the business.

“We have a lot of customers on our website and on platforms like DoorDash and Uber, and it requires attention every day,” said Santos. “Sometimes a customer has a question, and [Eric] does great. The business on those platforms is really, really busy.”

The other surprise for customers is the size of the store when they walk inside to see products. They invested in a quality refrigerator to have big coolers in the store. There are even times in the stores when they’ll hear customers exclaim from how much bigger it is than they expected.

“People expect just a couple of arrangements and bouquets. Some green plants,” chuckled Santos. 🍀

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"We're always full, and there's always something to see."

The team behind Santos Flowers is always eager to hear from customers as well. One of the first things that Santos makes sure to teach his employees is to have those conversations so they can receive feedback, get new ideas, and simply build relationships with the community.

"Talk to customers, ask them questions," he said. "Don't be afraid to say something nice to them."



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Hollywood Called... So What's Next?

And if you went to the movies this past Christmas and found yourself admiring the flowers in *Song Sung Blue*, there's a good reason for that.

The movie, starring Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson, spent \$29 million filming in seven New Jersey counties from October to December of 2024. Passaic County locations that were used included Scillieri-Arnold Funeral Home in Paterson, the Wayne Elks Lodge, and St. Joseph's Wayne Medical Center.

This past June, producers reached out to Eric after noticing the business's positive reviews and expressed interest in ordering flowers for when they shot in Paterson.

"Maria started working with Eric to make sure they would like it. They said they had no specific arrangements [in mind]," said Santos. "When we brought them the arrangements, they were so happy."

"Then the producers said, 'Listen, everyone likes your work. Can you make something bigger than that? We're waiting for you,'" he continued. "We said, 'Yes, why not?' and then prepared something quick for them."

As their star continues to rise, there is another big milestone that happened recently and more plans for the future. The other milestone is that they now own the Garfield building as opposed to renting the space.

And, with the future of Clifton's shop in mind, they are looking to expand to selling both flowers and coffee. They already had the machine in the store and were simply waiting on their license from the city when we spoke at the end of the year. The hybrid retail model has gained traction in recent years, where customers can sip their coffee while they browse floral arrangements.

"It's called 'flowers and coffee'," said Santos, "and we have really nice samples and designs. [Our plan is to] set up a small area for people to sit in and have coffee, and then buy flowers. But people can also take it with them."

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A Bright, Shiny Future

We all learned in school that under the right circumstances, with a high temperature and a high pressure, diamonds are formed. For Stacey Corbo and Patrick Kavanagh, putting the right kind of pressure on each other and their relationship has also created something beautiful.

“We definitely push each other to try and be better,” said Patrick, 35. “We keep each other in check if we’re not being healthy, or if we stop working out. We try to push each other to go to see a doctor if we’re not feeling well.”

Stacey, 36, echoed a similar belief. The fifth generation of Corbo Jewelers sees how they push each other in all aspects of their lives, but the couple also agreed that their impulsiveness is a daily area that they work on with each other.

“That part, we don’t keep each other in check with,” Stacey laughed. “We don’t say, ‘We don’t need this right now’, we just do it.”

One example? Making their Australian shepherd mix Marley a part of their family.

“But we love our dog,” said Stacey, firmly.

There’s more excitement to come this year. Following their engagement last February, Stacey and Patrick will get married on April 11 at Perona Farms in Andover Township.

They currently live in Clifton with Stacey’s parents as they look for their future home, and they’re hopeful that they’ll stay around this area. After the wedding, the honeymooners are off to Hawaii together, and then?

“We’re really excited to start our future together,” said Stacey. “Start a family, buy a house, and do all the things that you’re supposed to do when you’re a grownup.”

Patrick is also eager to start the next part of their lives, especially continuing to grow together.

“Now we’re at a point where we can go out and still have a lot of fun. We’re not tied down with children yet, and we’re enjoying these moments,” said Patrick. “After [we get married], we will kind of lock in. We’re excited for that chapter.”

The Element of Surprise

The proposal may not have felt elaborate to others, but it was perfect for Stacey and Patrick.

It was Valentine’s Day, and their annual tradition is going to Texas Roadhouse rather than the large restaurants that overcharge customers. But last year, the wait was three hours long and they were ready to leave after waiting for an hour and a half.



“We agreed and said, ‘You know what? We’re just gonna go home and order something. We’ll go out another day,’” recalled Stacey. “We drove home and were walking up the driveway. As I was typing the code into the garage pad, I turned around and he was down on one knee in the driveway.”

It was a special moment for them and for Stacey’s parents who were just inside. Patrick had known that he wanted to propose that night; he just didn’t expect the setting.

“The thing for me is, I really wanted to try to catch her off guard,” said Patrick. “She knew that it was coming to an extent, and it’s hard to catch her off guard, but I think I succeeded. She did have a lot of things in her hands that she immediately dropped.”

Patrick also had some assistance from Stacey’s father, Steve, who knows his diamonds. They ended up going with a radiant cut diamond, with diamonds all the way down the band. And, of course, it came from the family business located in Styertowne Shopping Center.

“We were all so excited,” Stacey said.

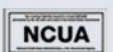
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Instant Connection

Born and raised a Cliftonite, Stacey grew up attending School 5, WWMS, and graduated from CHS in 2007. Her parents are Stephen and Ellen, and she has a younger brother, Michael. In high school, Stacey played the piccolo and flute in the Marching Band all four years.

She attended the College of Saint Elizabeth, now Saint Elizabeth University, and works today with Kevin V. Brito, both of them carrying forward the Corbo family legacy.

Patrick's childhood took place in Wood-Ridge as the middle child of parents Michael and Carol. His older brother is Michael and his younger sister is Christina. He went right into the workforce after high school as a plumber and today works for Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. In his youth, you'd most likely find him outside on his skateboard or playing the guitar.

The couple's meet-cute was using the dating service Bumble, not unusual for millennials. They both lived in Hoboken, and Stacey's first impression was that talking to Patrick was a breath of fresh air in an otherwise bleak dating environment.

"I had found someone that I felt like I knew forever," she said. "It was really comfortable."



From left, parents Ellen and Stephen Corbo, Patrick Kavanagh and Stacey Corbo, and brother Michael Corbo.

They started talking in early September of 2021. About a week and a half later, their first date was for Mexican food at Baja Restaurant in Hoboken. Stacey remembers waiting a couple of blocks away from the restaurant for Patrick and not feeling nervous as he approached her.

That comfort and easy conversation led to them going out after they finished at the restaurant so that the date wouldn't end.

"I liked her right away. She's really funny and really relaxed to be around," said Patrick. "I was definitely surprised by her interest in football and music, which was really cool. We both had a lot more in common than I thought in terms of things we hadn't talked about."

"It was just natural and has been great ever since," he added. "It's why we're getting married."



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Love at first sight might be an ideal in films, but Alexandra Constandinou and Robert Ferreri found something even more profound that many people will spend years looking for: natural communication.

Like true New Jerseyans, they met down the shore. Alexandra and her friends went down for her 25th birthday and a friend of hers said they could park in front of his house. All he asked was, when they went to the beach, for them to bring his group's chairs with them.

"I didn't know whose chair was whose," said Alexandra, 36. "I put one chair next to me, and that was Rob's."

The future couple started talking and quickly realized that they both grew up in the Maple Valley section; her on Long Hill Dr. and him on Abbe Ln. Some of Robert's childhood friends were her neighbors.

"Back in the day, we'd come home from school and hang out with kids in the neighborhood, but we just never remembered each other. It was funny," said Alexandra. "That was it. Twelve years later, here we are."

As it turns out, their love story is almost a tradition in the family. Robert's parents, the late Chief of Police Robert Ferreri and wife Mary Pat, grew up in Jersey City and also met while down the shore despite living near each other and having the same group of friends.

For those next few hours on the beach, Alexandra and Robert kept talking. That led to hanging out the next day and, from that point on, becoming inseparable.

"No joke, I would say in the past 12 years ... we've probably been together almost every day since then," said Alexandra.

For Robert, that future together was a no-brainer since that first day on the beach.

"Naturally, I thought she was very pretty," said Robert, 43, "but it wasn't until we started talking that I was attracted to her and realized it could be something more."

Cherishing Each Day

Love and affection were deeply ingrained in Alexandra's upbringing. But what she found with Robert still came with a degree of surprise.

"I grew up in a traditional Greek family where affection was very flaunted," Alexandra explained. "When you are more Americanized or brought up in a different culture, it's not the same. So, for me, I didn't think anything like that would 'wow' me."



"But he wasn't your typical guy," she continued. "With Rob, I always got a feeling of protection. I knew that he would always love me."

The youngest daughter of Gus and Sophia Constandinou, Alexandra grew up with sisters Vasil (CHS 2002) and Maria. She attended School 2 and WWMS before her family moved and as an adult has followed in her mother's professional footsteps.

She is now a Broker Salesperson for Nicholas Real Estate Agency, 1624 Main Ave., where her mother has acted as her mentor for 15 years.

Robert attended the same Clifton schools and graduated from CHS in 2001. He is the middle child, between older sister Lori Ann and younger brother John Patrick (CHS 2004), and years back worked for Frain Bovasso Associates Inc., located at 1033 US-46.

Robert works today for Gojo Industries, one of its most well-known products being Purell, as a Sales Representative Supervisor for the Manhattan region. As no stranger to New York City, it ended up playing an important backdrop in his personal life.

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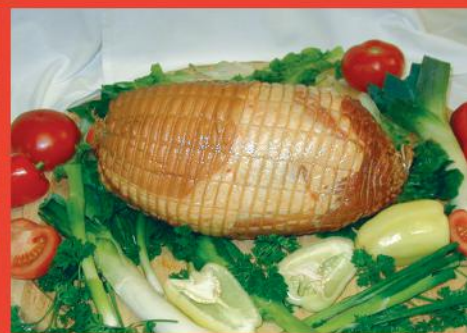
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Love Stories

“He said we were going to meet friends in the city, but we ended up getting there a little earlier,” said Alexandra about Robert’s proposal. “He then asked if I wanted to take a horse and carriage ride around the city.”

“I said no at first. It was so hot and I felt so bad for the horse,” she laughed. “Finally, the guy he had arranged it with said, ‘Oh, yeah. You should get on and I’ll give you a tour of the city.’”

They did, and Alexandra remembers that she was so involved in listening to what the guy was telling them that she was none the wiser about the bigger plan. Once they reached the Friends TV show fountain, the driver said that he would take their picture for the end of the tour.

“Then he proposed,” said Alexandra, “and we went to dinner overlooking Central Park [and later saw] all of our family and friends.”

The engagement, which happened in August of 2019, went just as Robert had planned.

“I knew that Alexa would’ve been happy with even the simplest proposal, but that’s why I knew I needed to do something extra special,” said Robert. “My biggest concern was making sure that no one slipped or her putting it together.”



The wedding was held at St. George Greek Orthodox Church, 818 Valley Rd. on Nov. 29, 2025. Living near Corrado’s Market, the couple are looking forward to starting their own family.

“I’m excited ... for us to do the things that we did with our parents,” said Alexandra.

And Robert has some important advice that he would give their younger selves on that beach.

“Cherish each day together, every memory, every laugh or cry, and share it with those you love,” he said, “because it goes fast, and you can’t get that time back.”

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It seems fair to say that John and Alyssa (MacNeal) De-Graaf's cup runneth over, especially since their blessings began as colleagues at Peerless Beverage Company.

The two of them were both working as merchandisers in the same department. Although they didn't work directly together at first, they would eventually work out in the trade together.

"We were co-workers, then friendly, and then we went out for Happy Hours with the rest of our team," said Alyssa, 35. "Then, I guess one day after a Happy Hour, we hung out by ourselves."

And that was it for them. The couple began dating in 2016 and wed seven years later on Sept. 15, 2023. Now entering the 10th year of their relationship, their first impressions of each other have held up well.

John, 36, admired his future wife's humor, independence, and how he always had a good time when he spent time with her. Alyssa remains grateful for what she describes as John's "cool, calm, and collected" demeanor.

"That was nothing I'd ever been with before," said Alyssa. "He lets things roll off his shoulders and takes things slow and easy. John is still very cool and calm; nothing really rattles him."



A Lifetime of Adventures

Staying cool and calm is exactly what helped the proposal go off without a hitch.

It was November of 2022 and the couple were going to Beneduce Vineyards in Pittstown for Alyssa's birthday.

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At right, in 1990 that's my family just before my dad died... at the bottom is Richie, a great Skipper and Fisherman...and at right, that's mom and me in 2007, supporting the Boys & Girls Club of Clifton....

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Despite not knowing what was to come, all of her friends were there and it struck her as odd when he immediately asked to take a photo there.

“Which we never do. He never wants to take a photo,” she laughed.

John was prepared to ask the question, but he was still “definitely nervous” for the big moment. But it helped knowing exactly that Alyssa’s nearest and dearest would want to be there.

“They’re all her close friends, and I knew they’d want to be there for it,” he said. “It’s one of the reasons I decided to do it with them; so they could celebrate together.”

John grew up in Clifton, attending School 3 and CCMS before he graduated with the CHS Class of 2008. His parents are John Sr. and Maria, and his younger brother is Alec (CHS 2010). John played defense for Clifton Hockey all four years.



Alyssa grew up in Tenaflly and played softball up until high school. She recalled a youth spent loving to go to the mall or talking on the phone with friends. She’s the eldest daughter of Todd and Eileen MacNeal, with two younger sisters Megan and Caitlyn.

The future excites both John and Alyssa, with her stating that they love traveling and cooking. Their honeymoon brought them to Germany and France, and they’ve traveled several times to the Outer Banks in North Carolina. They’ve also visited Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, and traveled to California last summer.

But their favorite adventures are also in the smaller, day-to-day moments. The couple bought a house in Orange last year and Alyssa believes that they have found their home.

“We really made it our own,” she said. “I think that the biggest compliment you can get is when someone comes to your house and says it feels homey and that they like being there. A lot of our friends and family say that every time they come by.”

They’ve had role models as well. John has long-admired how his parents respect one another and their nearly four decades together. Alyssa points to her aunt and uncle, Bree and Matt, as the first people that she saw “get married, start a family, and be super stable.”

“Also, Bennifer,” John added, using the couple name for celebrities Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck, making Alyssa laugh. “Even though they’re not together anymore, they were a strong couple for a couple of years.”

Jokes aside, John and Alyssa agreed their biggest strength is how they respect one another and have strong communication. Alyssa acknowledged, in a marriage, it might mean having tough conversations to get through challenges.

“As it gets harder when you go through life, [it’s important to make] sure that you’re always supporting each other during the good and bad,” she said. “It’s about always being there.”

And that’s precisely what excites John.

“Growing old together,” he said, which was met with an adoring “Aww, that’s so sweet” from Alyssa.

We couldn’t agree more.

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Nothing screams “good idea” like planning an outdoor wedding in Florida during hurricane season. But in 2024, that’s exactly what my husband and I did. We were dating long distance at the time, driving back and forth across Florida for nearly eight hours every weekend. Between long-distance planning and missing each other, my husband convinced me to move up the date from November to September, and hope for the best.

The week of the wedding was riddled with storms and bad weather. But after saying three Hail Mary’s with my father, the weather cleared for the wedding day; it was hot, but beautiful. Then, just two weeks later, Hurricane Helene hit South Florida, wiping out our wedding venue entirely. If we had stuck with our original November date, we would’ve been out of luck and starting our wedding planning from scratch. The miracu-

A Clear Horizon



lous timing of our wedding was a good reminder for me; trusting God, and trusting my husband, is always the right call. *By Erin (Joyce) Nazareth*

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A Thoughtful Question

By Robert Niessen

A thoughtfully planned date — one that ended with a life-changing question and an easy, joyful answer — was unforgettable for Paul Babula and Caitlin Slatcher.

But first, Athenia native Paul (CHS 2005) met Caitlin, who grew up in Hancock, New York, in 2018. As the relationship between the Byram Township residents evolved, Paul was ready to pop the question by August of 2024. So he began carefully planning a proposal that matched the importance of the question.

Caitlin recalled that the day began with what she thought was simply a special date.

“Paul took me on a date to the Botanical Gardens,” said Caitlin, 29, noting that they were dressed up so they “could get some nice photos together.”

When they arrived, she was surprised to learn that Paul had arranged a private tour.

“We met our tour guide,” Caitlin explained, “and she took us through various gardens, teaching us about the plants and history of the park.”

As the tour brought them to a waterfall, Caitlin turned around to find Paul on one knee.

“I immediately said yes,” she recalled. Roses and champagne followed — both a celebration of the moment and, for Paul, a long-awaited chance to finally breathe. “It was the perfect day.”

The meaning lived in the details for Paul.

“After weeks of planning and coordination, it was nice to see all the time and effort pay off,” said Paul, 37. “I really enjoyed working with the team that helped me set it up, and it was a rewarding experience to see it all come together.”



Still, when asked about his favorite part, Paul didn’t hesitate to say it was simply the moment “when she said ‘yes.’”

With their wedding set for May, they’re entering a new time in their lives with a memory shaped not by grandeur but by care, patience, and a single, unforgettable moment that they will always carry in their hearts.



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Building on Their Friendship

By Robert Niessen

Some love stories announce themselves loudly. Others, like Cynthia Hnatuck-Thompson and Christopher Thompson's story, unfold gently over time and are shaped by shared days, easy laughter, and a deep commitment to moving through life side by side.

They first met while working at Grand Union, now Stop & Shop, during a period when both were balancing work alongside higher education. From the very beginning, there was a sense of ease between them.

"The secret to our love is having a relationship built on a foundation of friendship," said Cynthia. "We genuinely enjoy each other's company, communicate honestly, and we always support one another." That friendship set the tone for everything that followed.

Their bond was tested early on when Cynthia left for college in Boston. The distance was difficult, especially during a time when Chris was still finding his footing. He later reflected that he was "young, [and] not in a great place," and being apart from her felt overwhelming.

They stayed connected through "many late-night phone calls, visits to campus, and her visits home," a stretch that challenged them but ultimately strengthened their relationship.

"We made it through," said Chris.

Their first date in May of 1997 remains vivid in Cynthia's memory. They met in the Rowe Manse parking lot before heading to the Allwood Cinema on Market St. to watch *Father's Day*. The night unfolded naturally with them playing a few rounds of H-O-R-S-E at the School 13 basketball hoop, followed by a walk to Carvel on Van Houten Ave.

"We have been together since that day," said Cynthia.

When she reflects on when love truly settled in, Cynthia returns to their second date. Sitting together on the swings at Mt. Prospect Park, she recalled how they "were under the stars," talking, laughing, and sharing their first kiss. It was a quiet, unplanned moment that stayed with them long after the night ended.

Over time, their relationship grew into a family. They



Cynthia and Christopher with kids William and Kayla.

raised two children in the Athenia section, Kayla (CHS 2020) and William, a CHS junior. Cynthia, who works as a preschool instructional coach in Jersey City, has spent her career guiding and supporting young children. Chris' work as a mechanic reflects the steady, hands-on approach that he brings to life at home as well.

"Our relationship thrives, because we have loyalty, emotional safety, and trust," said Cynthia. "Chris and I face challenges as teammates. We have grown up together and continue to grow as individuals with support from one another. ... I can't imagine my life without Christopher."

After 29 years together and 24 years of marriage, their story reflects a love shaped not by perfection, but by perseverance. Now both 47, they look back on nearly three decades with gratitude, not just for the milestones but for the ordinary days that shaped their lives.

Distance, change, uncertainty, and growth tested them in different ways, yet each challenge strengthened what they shared. Simply stated: "Love does truly get you through everything," said Chris.



By Ariana Puzzo

There's no limit to Grace Lisbona's love for the adults that she affectionately calls her children. So it's no surprise that it is what people immediately feel as they walk through the doors of the new Clifton Adult Opportunity Center Day Program building.

It's bright, spacious and, most importantly, full of love and history. When Lisbona envisioned the expansion of the CAOC's facilities, the goal was clear: supporting people otherwise overlooked or excluded from spaces that others can take for granted.

"In the building, it's their building. There is a full cooking program. ... There are life skills being taught all the time," said Lisbona. "I like to share everything that I have in my life, because they are my life."

Since 1982, the CAOC has beaten the odds and challenged the rhetoric. On Jan. 20, members of the community, civic leaders, and members of the clergy celebrated that enduring spirit at the new building's grand opening on the Municipal Complex, 900 Clifton Ave., just steps away from their existing Day Program center.

When we last spoke to Lisbona for Clifton Merchant's September 2022 cover story, she and the rest of the team were determined to see the project get off the ground. The groundbreaking was Dec. 21, 2023 and the project lasted nearly two years, reaching its completion last November.

The building stands at 100 ft by 40 ft with a total of 12,000 sq-ft over three floors. And it is the final result that



Lisbona envisioned for the 60-something members that they serve. To find out more about the CAOC, call Jodi Neumann at 973-445-1806 or the main line at 973-777-7114.

"We kept trucking on no matter how many people tried to block us. Some people said we didn't belong on public grounds because we're 'not part of the general public,'" said Lisbona. "We are all part of one general public. Singling us out in such a prejudicial way ... was truly offensive."

But it is a mentality that Lisbona encountered during her teaching career that began in the 60's. Lisbona spent 40 years in Clifton Public Schools, teaching at School 13, School 11, and later at CHS. By the 80's, she was teaching a class with a since-outdated label: "The Trainable Mentally Retarded".

"Only society has made that a dirty word. It only means we go slower, it doesn't mean we don't 'go,'" said Lisbona. "'Mental' means 'mind'; it doesn't mean we don't have one."

The CAOC strives to reinforce all of the contributions

that these adults can make after they age out of the school system at age 21. Adults learn how to cook and shop, take care of themselves, and they give back by visiting nursing homes and cleaning up parks and their grounds.

“Because of the ramps and elevators, we can now help more people in wheelchairs. We have expanded and keep expanding,” said Lisbona. “We’re trying to prove that we are all functional, usable citizens who are happy to be of service to the public.”

From Dream to Reality

There is a deep appreciation for the support the CAOC provides — and that gratitude extends beyond our city’s borders. Along with clergy from our city, religious leaders from Montclair and Paterson were also in attendance and included priests and rabbis who delivered blessings.

It included attendees from St. John Kan-ty Church, 49 Speer Ave., and Crossroads Church, 195 Piaget Ave. Senior pastors Wil- liam and Daisy Kirchhofer attended from Crossroads Church with Pastor Willie reflecting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

A good reminder to reflect on how we can be better neighbors to everyone, not just those that we have direct contact with or engage with on a daily basis.

“It was so beautiful. I can’t tell you how many clergy- men were there,” said Lisbona. “They all spoke so beauti- fully and were happy that we are servicing the needs of the people we help.”

Known-to-be quiet and always respectful, the CAOC is exactly what anyone looks for in a good neighbor. They were welcomed to the neighborhood by former



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Mayor Gerald H. Zecker back in the 1980s when Lisbona approached the City Council with an appeal for their help.

“There was no place to put my children after they finished school,” said Lisbona. “They were sitting at home in front of the television and refrigerator.”

Zecker, who served as mayor from 1978 to 1982, had a solution. There were buildings, many of which were dilapidated, that the city had no use for and didn’t have the money to renovate.

“He said, ‘If you can take a building, it’s your job to raise the money to renovate them [so they are up to] building and historic codes,’” recalled Lisbona. “Since 1980, we’ve never taken city money to function our buildings. We lease them from the city for \$1 per year.”

They have kept a low profile, which was always their preference. Leading the charge is Lisbona, as the executive director, with All Programs Manager Jodi Neumann and All Programs Assistant Manager Cory Bober. They work alongside a 10-member Board, plus about 48 staff members.

Only once they outgrew the original Day Program center on the Municipal Complex and asked for property did the public realize their location and expressed opinions about their request.



The CAOC team is often at city hall, offering for sale some of their handiwork. Other photos are from the opening of the new building.

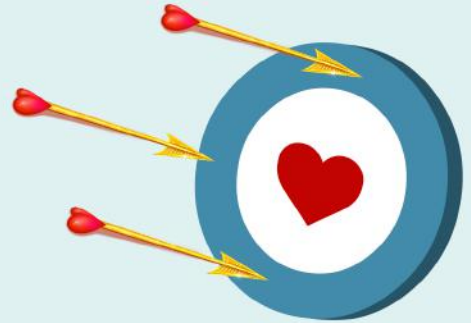
Prior to our previous conversation in the summer of 2022, the CAOC faced opposition in July from state and city officials, plus residents, who believed a new building at the location would alter the Municipal Complex’s historic setting. They ultimately needed approval from the state Department of Environmental Protection’s New Jersey Historic Sites Council to proceed.

The DEP had previously voted 3-1 to deny the CAOC’s request at a June 16 hearing, stating in part that a lack of alternative locations for an expansion was objectionable. Yet Lisbona made it clear both then and now why staying on the Municipal Complex made sense, especially since CAOC was not leaving its other buildings.

“The section that we wanted to build on had become like a swamp. It was filled with water and mosquitoes. We constantly had it sprayed,” said Lisbona. “But it’s



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in close proximity to the other building. Some people are blind or physically handicapped. We needed a building to be close.”

Not just close to the existing Day Program center either. The CAOC’s first group home opened on July 15, 1998 and is also located on the Municipal Complex. Eight individuals who are over the age of 21 currently live in that group home.

A second, smaller group home opened in 2001 and is located at 228 Second St., across from St. Paul Roman Catholic Church. There are six residents of that group home.

“People tried to stop us on every level, including the New Jersey Historic Sites Council,” said Lisbona. “We were denied the right to question [it].”



Until they connected with Peter Gaudio, a historic lawyer who “turned it from a denial into an approval” after the firm determined that the CAOC’s rights were violated by them not getting an opportunity to rebut anything that was said against them.

“Peter was amazing,” said Lisbona. “He doesn’t want

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any credit but, because of him, we could move forward.”

Like Mr. Fred Rogers always told us, there were other helpers along the way. One was Zoning Officer Daniel Howell, who in his retirement watched over and challenged the building process that was unfamiliar to Lisbona.

“We met all of the codes and requirements, and they gave us approval,” said Lisbona. “[But we needed him, because] I’ve handled contractors before, but never built a building.”

There was also former City Manager Nick Villano who reasserted at City Council meetings that Lisbona and the CAOC were not asking the public or city for funding or taxpayer dollars. There was also the project’s contractor who Lisbona said formed a deep bond “with my people.”

“Mark would say, ‘Grace, I think it would be better if we did this’ or ‘the kids would see this better or people would focus on this better if it’s done this way,’” she recalled. “He was just an amazing and goodhearted human being. ... They all made this dream a reality.”



Always Surviving, Still Thriving

Volunteers, donations, and Medicaid funding are what bankrolled the project. But, once upon a time, the CAOC’s financial support came from the State Division of Developmental Disabilities.

After seven or eight years, Lisbona knew financial support from the government was the only way that

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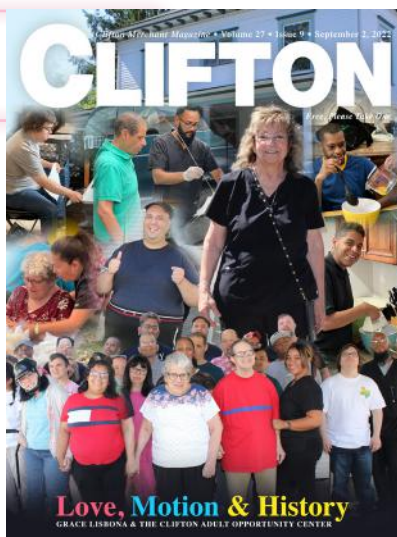


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the organization could exist. So the late Edward Moore, the Division's director and a strong advocate for people with mental and physical disabilities, visited our city from Trenton.

"He immediately, upon seeing our work, came to our rescue," Lisbona told Clifton Merchant in 2022, as seen at right. "He expressed appreciation for all the efforts that we had given to our people."



The later shift from DDD to Medicaid funding has made it possible to save for this project. When funds came from the DDD, unspent monies were ultimately returned. Lisbona told her people to make wishlists and if money wasn't spent by the end of the year on important items like a boiler or heating, they could buy computers or anything else that was less essential.

"We never spent more than we could," said Lisbona. "Now with Medicaid, it carries over to the next year and is not taken from us. We could save and scrimp to be able to afford a contractor."

The new Day Program center has occupancies of 60 people per floor, with 4,000 sq-ft of space each for its basement, first floor, and second floor. It doesn't operate as a group home, and the executive director added that embracing growth doesn't mean that they want to reach capacity.


"We want the number of people we can help [to correlate with how many people] can benefit from us," said Lisbona. "We don't want to get too big, because [then you risk raising] yourself to the height of incompetency."

The benefits will continue for years to come. Now with the new building, the intended plan is to put the buildings on one legacy lease since all of them are city buildings.

"They are owned by the City of Clifton so, if the Opportunity Center folds or it is no longer in existence, everything will automatically go to the city," said Lisbona. "Until then, we have the right to use them as long as we're in business."

Which, if history is an indication, seems likely to continue for years to come.

"There are so many good human beings out there who are ready and willing to help us," said Lisbona. "We are also survivors. We will survive."



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Three Cheers *For Bev*

By Ariana Puzzo

Good things can actually come in threes, which Beverly Lacsina has proven by successfully opening her third business at the end of last year.

The new Nutley beverage bar Bevs, located on Bloomfield Ave., is a full-circle moment. Lacsina (CHS 2008, inset) opened Walnut Street Kitchen and Walnut Street Bagel Co. in Montclair in April and September of 2022, respectively.

Bevs entered the scene on Dec. 19, 2025 and, despite needing to handle different ingredients versus when she's preparing her popular meatloaf or baking cakes, Lacsina enjoys the hustle. She's not new to it either.

"Once I started working in the restaurant industry, I knew that I wanted to have a restaurant at some point," said Lacsina. "Knowing that I wanted to own a business came first, and figuring everything else out came after. But I have always loved cooking since I was a kid."

That began in the kitchen beside her mother, Rizalina, when she would enlist the three Lacsina children to help during house parties. Lacsina, the youngest child of Amando and Rizalina, has two older siblings, Abby (CHS 2000) and Chris (CHS 2004).

They often prepared Filipino cuisine for these parties, and that laid the foundation for Lacsina to cook for her friends as she got older. She even took requests.

"I used to make eggs and potatoes. Home fries and eggs," she clarified with a laugh. "As a teenager, it was both easy and good."

And there's still a touch of her mother's kitchen in everything that she does now. The menu for Walnut Street Kitchen is inspired by Filipino food influences in her life,



which includes beloved appetizer: Mom's Lumpia. The fried Filipino pork and vegetable spring rolls are served with a sweet chili sauce.

"I used my mom's recipe, which is the best," said Lacsina, "and it's one of the best sellers in the restaurant."

Another popular dish is Lacsina's meatloaf, which she takes a classic approach to by including potatoes, peas, and carrots with a mushroom gravy.

"What it comes down to is what you put into the loaf. I worked on that recipe for a bit ... and it makes people feel comfort and nostalgia," explained Lacsina. "That's what I think the baseline for food and people loving it is: how it makes them feel, beyond just the flavors. It's the flavors, plus the feeling."

Fully Immersed

The Clifton native has lived in Nutley for eight years, but she appreciates her hometown ties. Having our city just down the road from her bar meant she felt fairly confident that she could attract a solid support system to get the spot going.

Lacsina attended School 9 and CCMS. After graduating from CHS, she attended Rutgers – New Brunswick and entered as pre-med until her interests pivoted. She started working at Stage Left Steak in New Brunswick in 2010, which encouraged her to separately study wine and consider a career in the viticulture industry.

“It was the nicest restaurant in town and kind of where they groomed and trained us to find an interest in the [restaurant] industry,” said Lacsina, 36. “Most of my fellow co-workers were in the same grade in college, so it was interesting to see my former bosses inspire us to have interest in fine dining as 20-something year olds.”

“It’s not something you necessarily care about,” she added, laughing. “We were always ready to party. I really appreciated that they were able to understand where we were in our lives but still pull us into this job and this industry and make it more than just making money so we could go out and do stuff.”

Lacsina stayed with Stage Left Steak for seven years and discovered during that time that she had a “really great palate for wine.” She became their wine steward and the assistant manager of their Wine and Beverage program, then eventually the restaurant manager.

“As a young 20-something-year-old, for these serious bosses to put a lot of responsibility on me, it made me feel like I could be a valuable person in this industry,” said Lacsina. “By year five, [I realized that] it would be a good life goal and dream to open up a restaurant.”

The industry was changing by her mid-twenties, particularly with the acceleration and expansion of social media in the 2010s. As new trends started to appear, Lacsina saw how the “vanity side of the restaurant industry started to be focused on more through social media.”

“Around then, I was going to a lot of restaurants in New York and experiencing that life. I’d get inspired by the different things that I ate and would go home and recreate stuff,” said Lacsina.

She also made it a point to talk with other people, including the different chefs that she worked alongside. When she would ask how they made certain dishes, she noticed how they “seemed to love what they were doing.”

But Lacsina was also able to see the reality: the job was stressful. Even more so on busy nights, yet that pulled her in further to learn the inner workings of everything. Long before opening up a restaurant, she made sure that she knew the different roles in one from front to back.



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Three Cheers For Bev

It meant working every front-of-the-house or service position — from being a host to a busser to a restaurant manager. When Lacsina wanted to gain administrative experience, she worked as an office administrator at LivePerson in Manhattan for about a year and a half. But that was her day job. On weekends, she kept ties in the industry by working at a vineyard in South Jersey.

“Experience ... will give you an insane leg up, because there are people who view opening a restaurant as something that’s vanity-based,” said Lacsina, “but it’s so much more than ‘cool’, having a restaurant or a bar.”

Her advice to people currently coming up or interested in the industry is simple. Get a minimum of two years physical experience in a restaurant, and do what she did.

“Try to immerse yourself in different positions outside of just being an owner, a manager, or a server,” she said. “It’s good to know every aspect of your operation.”

Raising the Bar

Knowing the ins and outs isn’t just beneficial for a restaurant’s big picture. It helps on a day-to-day basis, which Lacsina appreciates in an industry known for unpredictability.

Amidst the successes, she acknowledged the challenges.

Sometimes it’s a basement flooding. Right now, an iffy economy makes each business’s word of mouth essential. That continues to be an essential component of keeping Walnut Street Kitchen on people’s radar.

“It just makes me proud to have an establishment in Montclair,” said Lacsina. “My goal was to have a BYOB restaurant in Montclair when I decided that I wanted to open one up.” Follow @walnutstreetkitchen_ on IG.

The vision truly took shape at the tail end of 2020, amidst the coronavirus pandemic. After she took a trip to Puerto Rico for the first time in January of 2021, she returned home and buckled down in her search for a restaurant. She found the space three weeks after her return and felt like it was the ideal opportunity.

“It was everything that I wanted,” she said. “I’m proud of the fact that I was able to take a dream, a thought, or a wish and totally manifest it and bring it to life.”

The creation of Bevs looked different. It was in 2024 when Lacsina was introduced by a mutual friend to her eventual silent partner and landlord Marc Russell. He had previously owned a bar, Northern Soul, in Hoboken for about 20 years. When they got dinner together, it was largely to do with Lacsina living in Nutley and his newly purchased building being located in Nutley.

That was the night that Russell asked Lacsina if she would be interested in opening a bar.



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"I thought he was crazy. I already had two businesses, and they were doing well," she said.

But she did go home that night and think about it, and then they got to know one another. It wasn't long until he saw that she was interested in the idea despite Lacsina's belief that she wouldn't be interested.

What eased some fear of the unknown and the greater responsibility of it was that Russell could offer his insight as a multi-business owner, even beyond the bar and restaurant industry.

"He seemed like a really good person to have on my side, in my pocket," said Lacsina. "He's an entrepreneur times a thousand. He has infinite knowledge."

Putting that knowledge to good use, Lacsina's schedule isn't for the faint of heart. She oversees her businesses on a daily basis, splitting time between the restaurant and the bar.

On Sundays and Mondays when the restaurant is quieter, you'll find Lacsina working behind the bar at Bevs while her chef manages the restaurant in Montclair. Mondays are also when the bar does industry nights. Then, she splits her time overseeing both places throughout the week and cooks at the restaurant on Fridays and Saturdays.

There are 10 total employees at the restaurant and bagel shop. The bar has about four or five employees. Lacsina noted that overseeing others' work is a harder aspect of when you own a business and that it remains challenging.

"Everyone has different stories, and there's always something different going on in everyone's life. You have to care about that as a business owner," said Lacsina. "You also have to adjust [how] you deal with people. It's different for every employee, and you can't treat everyone the same all the time."

She added that preparing for the worst is how you deal with certain scenarios, particularly when multiple employees call out at the same time. It requires placing a great deal of trust in the ones who work for you as well while making



sure they're doing the things that you ask them to do.

"It's not always easy with multiple places, but you get to handpick these people and work closely with them," said Lacsina. "So you find a mutual understanding and a respect."

Which is exactly what she found when she got her start at Stage Left Steak. Her bosses Mark Pascal and Francis Schott are resources and mentors that have remained "invaluable" to her over the past five years.

"I consider them my work dads always," said Lacsina. "Any question that I've ever had, they've always given me great answers. They have over 30 years of experience owning and operating their restaurants and businesses."

"They went to Rutgers and started their careers almost similarly to me, working at the nicest restaurant in town and then opening their own place," she added. "I think that it continues to inspire them, because they see potential for how they can affect and change employees' lives."



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He's no Corporal "Radar" O'Reilly of the 4077th MASH, but Charles Stauhs knows when those blades are spinning overhead and approaching from a distance.

It isn't unusual, in the summer especially, for Stauhs to be in his basement near Montclair State and hear blades buzzing over the old Toys "R" Us. Stauhs tracks their journey on his radar, and he hears them as far out as down to the golf course on Rt. 3.

He's not the only resident of Robin Hood Rd. who's had enough.

"My neighbors are sick and tired of it. ... It's not like a little quick thing flying over the house," said Stauhs. "One neighbor who was in Vietnam said, 'I have heard more helicopters in Clifton, New Jersey than I did over there.'"

They're not police or EMS responses either, which Stauhs said he could accept. He emphasized that the issue is with tourism helicopters.

"People are making thousands of dollars a day to take people on a 25-minute ride down the Rt. 3 corridor, around the Statue of Liberty, and then to look at Midtown before flying back to [Essex County Airport]," said Stauhs (CHS 2002).

Stauhs, a lieutenant with the Clifton Fire Department, first noticed a sudden spike in helicopter tourism during the coronavirus pandemic. In 2022, he started reaching out to the press and to politicians. When former Mayor James Anzaldi put him in contact with the airport manager, he began voicing his discontent.



In the skies over Clifton, a touring chopper and from left, Charles P. Stauhs, Donna Corizzi, and Eve Rekker.

"Conservatively, I've probably filed over 2,000 email complaints since 2022," said Stauhs, 42. "I started up again, because it was really bad this holiday season."

"The companies that run out of [the airport in Fairfield] charge \$250 to \$300 per seat in these helicopters and seat as many as six people," he continued. "They're shaking our houses and flying over neighborhoods, generating roughly \$1,800 in revenue each time."

On Jan. 20, the lifelong resident attended a Zoom meeting with two volunteer Board members of Stop the Chop NY/NJ. The volunteers, Melissa Elstein and Nick Wierda, were among those discussing how people can join the fight to reduce helicopter noise and ban the non-essential tourist and commuter flights happening over the NY/NJ metropolitan area.

Two years after its founding, Stop the Chop NY/NJ successfully reached the 2016 Agreement between New York City and the helicopter tour industry to reduce the annual helicopter tourist flights based at Downtown Manhattan Heliport from 60,000 down to 30,000.

That agreement additionally banned NYC-based helicopter tours on Sundays and banned flying over land on the days that they do fly.

The loophole?

Helicopter tours can fly from any New Jersey location for sightseeing sights, like Central Park. Commuter helicopters are also based, and overnight, at our heliports and airports. That means, even when a commuter passenger is flying from one of NYC's three heliports, that helicopter usually flies from New Jersey to pick up that NYC passenger.

"There are three petitions that I [encouraged] all of my neighbors to sign," said Stauhs. "We first have to get everyone involved, and then the next thing is contacting every politician who's living within Essex County Airport's range and corridor."

Along with contacting our representatives, the other immediate course of action is emailing the airport manager Joseph Cali.

"Send a polite but firm complaint regarding noise and altitude. He is legally required to compile these logs, and we can access them via Open Public Records Act requests to use as evidence in Washington D.C. and/or locally," Stauhs stated.

Write to Cali at jcali@ecia.essex-countynj.org or call 973-575-0952.

Stauhs also intends to keep working closely with Stop the Chop NY/NJ, as a liaison to his neighborhood. To donate or take action, visit: stopthechopnynj.org. To connect to Stauhs, write to him at CPStauhs@gmail.com.

Part of what activated Stauhs' involvement, and what he hopes encourages other people, is two fatal crashes last year, where a tour helicopter crashed in the Hudson River along New Jersey and the Washington, DC crash in the Potomac.

"We cannot wait for another tragedy," he stated. "By working with Stop the Chop, we are joining a massive coalition that spans both sides of the Hudson River."

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Heidi Lynn Avron set a record at the April 2002 Bunny Bash with 368 Bunny Hops in five minutes!

Clifton Rec's Bunny Bash is March 28 at Nash Park, 9:30-11:30 am, rain or shine, and includes a Bunny Hop, Easter Bonnet Parade, Mrs. Bunny's Playstation, a visit with Mr. Bunny, and breakfast. For full event details go to cliftonrec.com or call 973-470-5956.

Gardener Karen Myers offers a pruning class on Feb. 7 from 1-2:30 pm at the City Green Farm Eco-Center, 171 Grove St. Find out why pruning is important, how to make pruning cuts and the pruning tool basics. Tickets: \$15 (non-refundable). Rain date: Feb. 8. The event requires participants to safely use stairs and navigate unpaved, uneven grounds. Write erin@city-green.org. To register, visit citygreenonline.org/events.

Power of One's Grief & Loss Support Group meets 1-3 pm, Feb. 26 in the Hope Reformed Church, 308 Burgess Pl. The faith-based program by Kim Castellano, a Christian Counselor and Life Coach, provides a compassionate space for individuals navigating loss. Pre-register by calling 862-239-5905 or writing info@powerofoneccom.org.

The 14U Clifton Jr Mustangs battle Union City on Super Bowl Sunday. Pack the sidelines on Feb. 8 at 3 pm, located at 26 Park Rd., Bayonne, and show the Mustangs support.



VFW Post 7165 presents the Steely Dan Tribute band *Good Stuff* on March 21, at 491 Valley Rd. Doors open at 5, dinner served from 5:30-7 and *Good Stuff* follows. Tickets are \$75 for the dinner and show. Cash bar. For tickets, call Ron Marrone at 201-304-4982 or write jdambrozio1@live.com. Pay by check, cash, or Venmo. Find out more about the band, visit goodstuffband.net.

Operation Clean and Dry collects donations for infants and babies through Feb. 27. Needed items: diapers (all sizes, especially 3-6), baby wipes, diaper rash cream, pull-ups/training pants, changing pads, new baby toiletries (shampoo, wash, lotion), other diapering essentials. Drop-off items at JK Realty, 270 Colfax Ave. Host a mini-collection at your workplace, school, or church. More details? Contact Melissa at Center for Family Resources: 973-962-0055 ext. 231 or write melissah@cffr.net.

Clifton's Code Blue Warming Center, a lifeline for the unhoused, is staffed at the Clifton Rec Center, Main and Washington Aves., through March 31, whenever the temperature hits 32 degrees or lower. Support is essential in terms of donations of winter clothing and canned or packaged food. Volunteers are also welcomed. Food was donated last winter by the Love of Grub, the Allwood Diner, Power of One, St. Peter's Haven, and Food Brigade. You can help, too. To donate essential items, deposit some of those listed below in a bin in the City Hall lobby, 900 Clifton Ave. These can include items such as body wipes, toothbrushes, mouthwash, toilet paper, hairbrushes, body wash, deodorant, body/hand lotion, vaseline, or shampoo. Have questions, know someone in need or are you interested in volunteering? Call Nate King at 973-470-5780.



On Jan. 21, the Clifton Schools first therapy dog turned three. Chewie, a Standard Goldendoodle, is handled by Assistant Superintendent Mark Gengaro. Clifton's furry friend helped launch Team Chewie, a program that now includes four therapy dogs dedicated to supporting students and staff. To celebrate Chewie's birthday, students and staff across the district collected food and supplies for the Clifton Little Free Pet Pantry program. Introducing therapy dogs in schools is part of a structured, research-based intervention program that is designed to support academic, behavioral, and mental health goals.

City of Clifton 2026 Dog License Registration

You may now register your dogs online at:
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Residents may also obtain their dog license

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Clifton Health Department,
900 Clifton Ave., 2nd floor,
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School 11 principal Timothy Wacha is with fourth grader Alexandria Hines and her sister. Alexandria was one of 12 winners in the 30th Annual Passaic County Clerk's Calendar Contest, selected from among 950 submissions by students in 16 communities. Honorable mentions were awarded to Wiktor Czyzak of School 5 and Cordelia Zaro of School 15. Clifton Superintendent Dr. Danny Robertozzi engaged School 14 first graders in Reaman Mustafa's classroom on Jan. 20 in a reading and guitar performance of The Duck Song by Bryant Oden. Students waddled like ducks, sang along, and enjoyed lemonade and grapes that matched the story.

CHS '76 Mustangs 50th reunion is June 15 in East Hanover. Email John George at georgesservice@gmail.com.

Power of One walkers meet at Richardson Scale Park, 680 Van Houten Ave. on Mondays and Wednesdays at 8 am for an hour walk. The walk is free and so is parking.

An Afternoon Teddy Bear Pajama & Hot Cocoa Art Party is Feb. 21, from 2-3 pm, at the Clifton Arts Center. Kids ages 1-6 are welcome with caregivers. Cost is \$25 or \$28 for non-residents. Wear your favorite pajamas and bring your cuddliest teddy bear. Hot cocoa, cookies, and milk will be served. To register by check or cash, call the CAC at 973-472-5499 or register online at allpaid.com.

Mustang Mania will feature Superstars of Pro Wrestling on Feb. 28, 6 pm in the CHS gym for a live wrestling event to benefit the Danny A. Robertozzi Superintendent Scholarship Fund. The event will feature various matches, with an appearance by legend Tito Santana. Admission is \$26 with reserved seating additional. Purchase: events.hometownticketing.com/boxoffice/clifton.

Music enrichment at Clifton Arts Center by retired Clifton music teacher Thomas Charsky is a six-week session with five teaching classes and one class-rehearsal and parent performance. Call the Arts Center to register by check or cash at 973-472-5499. cliftonartscenter.org for details. Register online at allpaid.com.

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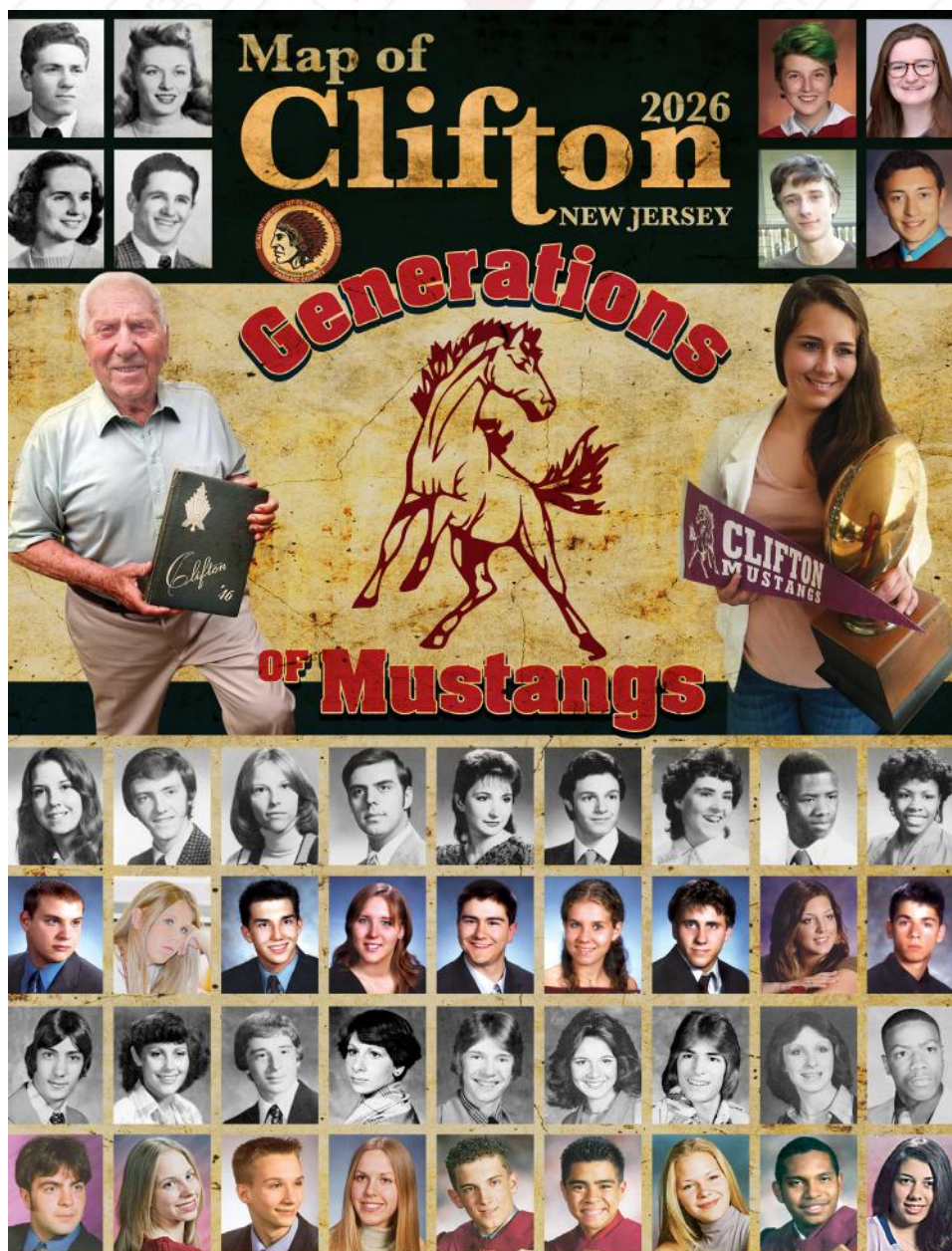
Sophia Lazaridis and Brandon Lang are nominated for the Television Academy 45th College Television Awards. Lazaridis, above, CHS 2022, is a senior at MSU; Lang is a 2025 MSU grad. They received the nod as producers and writers on a project titled *San Francisco: On the Edge*. Winners will be announced March 28 in North Hollywood, CA.

Dante's grand opening and networking is Feb. 11 from 4:30-6:30 pm at 955 Valley Rd. Meet the owner and staff and tour the new restaurant, previously Alexis Steakhouse. Ribbon cutting is at 5 pm. Register: NorthJerseyChamber.org.

The Clifton Ramadan lighting ceremony is Feb. 14 at 4:15 pm on the lawn of city hall.

Regina Mundi Knights of Columbus 3969 Valentine's party is Feb. 15 at St. John Kanty Church Hall, 49 Speer Ave. For tickets, call: 973-610-5689 or 973-432-8466.

Does your child need homework help? Volunteers are at Main Memorial Library, 292 Piaget Ave., for students grades 1 to 4 on Mondays-Wednesdays, 4-5:30 pm. Space is limited. Register: cliftonpl.org.



BIG THANKS TO The Map of Clifton Advertisers

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- Gild Realty Mahmoud Ijbara
- Integrated Power Services
- JK Realty
- Mayor Ray Grabowski
- Mr. Cupcakes
- Neglia Engineering
- NOVA UA FCU
- Passaic County Clerk Danielle Ireland-Imhof
- Shook Funeral Home
- Smith Sondy Asphalt Construction
- St. Peter's Haven
- State Farm Agent Thomas Tobin
- Tomahawk Professional Services

MUSTANG

SPORTS

By Tom Szieber

The progress made by the Clifton girls basketball team is evident. A year after going 7-20, the Mustangs are competing despite a slew of injuries and are poised to qualify for the North I, Group IV playoffs. Still, they will need to make sure their collective health remains intact.

Some of the top stars have endured injuries, namely senior center Haley Abreu (concussion), junior center Natalie Vazquez (concussion), senior forward Li'Ajah Ramos (shoulder) and senior guard Gianna Colon (fractured wrist). Colon's injury will cost her the remainder of the season.

"The injuries keep mounting up," said second-year head coach Lou Lotito. "But we are in a good position right now. I would feel more comfortable [with our playoff prospects] with a couple more wins, which I think we can get."

Senior guard Christina Bruguglio has been the Mustangs' (8-7 as of Jan. 26) top offensive weapon this winter, averaging 12.3 points per game through 14 contests.

Strong Indi Track Performers

The Mustangs have been their usual solid selves on the track this winter, as the girls took third in the Passaic County Indoor Championships on Jan. 19 in Staten Island. Junior Jaide Diaz won the pole vault competition at 7'6", with sophomore Mallory Nicol finishing second with a seven-foot attempt. Senior Mikaella Francisco took first in the long jump at 17'4.5." Francisco also etched her name into the program's record books by clocking a 7.54 in the 55 meter dash, setting a new school record.

The boys took fourth overall, but senior Volodymyr Kozliuk's 6'4" high jump won him the event. Francisco (long jump), Diaz (pole vault), Kozliuk (high jump), Nicol (all-around), senior Alexis Smith (3200m), and senior Joel Vera (all-around) earned first team All-Passaic County honors. The girls finished third in the Big North Liberty meet on Jan. 5, while the boys took fourth.

"I was impressed with the results from leagues and counties," said coach Kareem West. "We are going to have a few people probably move on from sectionals. It would be nice to have another state sectional champion."



Above: senior forward Li'Ajah Ramos; Right: sophomore 100-pounder Aviani Garcia.



Young Wrestlers Making Their Mark

The Clifton girls wrestling team's (7-4) strong first half of the season has been fueled by a talented young core. Leading the charge is freshman Nadine Millet, a soccer player who decided to try wrestling and hasn't looked back. Her 13-1 record at 152 pounds reflects both her athleticism and the grit that keeps her fighting until the final whistle.

Sophomore Lillianne Addabbo has emerged as a team leader, bringing year-round wrestling experience to her 13-2 campaign at 114 pounds. Fellow sophomore Aviani Garcia adds depth at 100 pounds with her solid 10-4 record. Under head coach Zuzana Geleta's guidance, the Mustangs are proving that their blend of fresh talent and dedicated veterans makes them a force to watch on the mat.

Clifton United in playoff race behind Montana, Rascher, Sisco

And on the ice, Clifton United (8-6 as of Jan. 26) is right in the thick of the playoff race in the North, Public Co-Op section, sitting in 14th in power points (also as of Jan. 26). Senior forward Ryan Montana of Cedar Grove is having a memorable winter, leading the team in points (35) and goals (22). Two Clifton athletes, senior forward Trevor Rascher and sophomore defenseman Ryan Sisco, are contributing significantly as well. Rascher is second in points with 29 and goals with 14. He and Sisco share the team lead in assists with 15 each.



The School 16 community (above) is teaming up with St. Peter's Haven to tackle hunger from Feb. 3-13 as part of the annual Souper Bowl of Caring. The national event encourages communities to donate canned and packaged items before and after the Big Game. To help, drop off non-perishable items at the front of School 16 (755 Grove St.) or at The Haven's pantry, 380 Clifton Ave., from 9 am to 1 pm. Since 1997, the Souper Bowl of Giving has run collections with proceeds to The Haven's Pantry, which serves over 1,400 households (over 3,700 individuals) in our city each month, and the number keeps increasing. Want to make a monetary donation? Visit saintpetershaven.org.

The Bloomin' 5K Run/1 Mile Walk to benefit St. Peter's Haven is April 26 from 8:30-10 am, at Main Memorial Park. The Haven welcomes back sponsor Garden State Honda of Clifton, enabling the The Haven to add a marketplace, music and DJ, carb station, flower station, kids activities, and more to come as race day nears. Register for 5K/walk: \$35 through March 15, \$40 until April 24, or \$45 on race day. Kids aged 10 and under, no charge. Rain or shine. Beat the fastest time of 14:57.3 (men) or 19:42.5 (women) for an additional cash prize. To sign up or register to volunteer, visit: trisignup.com/Race/Info/NJ/Clifton/Bloomin5Kand1MileWalk.



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8:30 AM

Main Memorial Park



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Mustangs of the Month



Kylee Ocasio, Julia Grabowski, Bryan Szurlej, Thomas Bauman.

Here are the **Mustangs of the Month** for February 2026.

These four students, one from each grade, were selected by the vice principals at CHS, to be spotlighted for their personal achievements and school-wide contributions.

Kylee Ocasio – Freshman

When things at home or in school get tough for freshman Kylee Ocasio, she focuses on what she's working toward achieving.

"I stay motivated by taking breaks when I need them, asking for help if I'm confused, and telling myself that it's OK to struggle sometimes," said Ocasio (CHS 2029). "I also think about how good it feels when I finally understand something or finish an assignment, and that helps me keep going even when it's hard."

The freshman is on CHS' Competition Cheer team and has cheered since age 8. Ocasio is also on the NJ Fire Club Softball team and hopes to continue playing in college.

"I've committed a lot of time to the sport, and I feel the happiest playing softball," said Ocasio. "It's thrilling, because there is so much going on at once. It's really, really fun to play."

Ocasio's mother inspires her, with the freshman crediting her as someone who "never gives up. She does so much for our family, volunteers her time to help others, and she always motivates me to be the best that I can be."

Her most influential teacher is Mrs. Hahn, her 8th grade Language Arts teacher at WWMS.

"She made learning fun, always encouraged me, and I felt most comfortable in her classroom."

Julia Grabowski – Sophomore

Success looks different for everyone and for Julia Grabowski, the plans to start her ascent post-college begins with her attending college to major in Computer Engineering or double-major in Computer Science and Cybersecurity.

"To motivate myself during tough times, I think about my future," said Grabowski (CHS 2028). "I remind myself that the world will keep spinning regardless of what happens, and everything will one day fall into place."

One major hurdle that she has overcome this year at CHS is Chemistry class. Despite still being in the class, she's strengthened her perseverance and appreciates the challenge it provides her. That work ethic is her own, but it may also be a direct result of her greatest inspiration.

"[My Uncle Chris] has shown me what the outcome of hard work and dedication looks like," she said. "From him, I've learned that anything is possible when you take that leap of faith to follow your dreams."

Grabowski's school extracurriculars include playing on the Varsity Girls' Soccer team and serving as president of the Cultural Diversity Club. In the classroom, Grabowski's favorite subject is math.

"I love the feeling of accomplishment after being able to solve a difficult problem. I also like how broad math is, and I am always eager to learn more."



CLIFTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

2026 - 2027 School Calendar

July 3, 2026 - Independence Day observance (offices/schools closed)

July 2026						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
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August 2026						
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30	31					

September 2026						
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October 2026						
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November 2026						
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29	30					

December 2026						
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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

September 1, 2026 - All Staff Report
 September 2, 2026 - School reopens for students K-12
 September 2-4, 2026 - (early dismissal for students)
 September 7, 2026 - Labor Day (Schools closed)
 September 10, 2026 - CHS Back-to-School Night
 September 11, 2026 - Early dismissal for high school students & staff
 September 17, 2026 - Middle School Back-to-School Night
 September 18, 2026 - Early dismissal for middle school students & staff
 September 21, 2026 - Yom Kippur (schools closed)
 September 24, 2026 - Elementary Back-to-School Night
 September 25, 2026 - Early dismissal for elementary school students & staff
 October 1, 2026 - All CELA A, B & S Back-to-School Night
 October 2, 2026 - Early dismissal for CELA A, B & S students & staff
 October 12, 2026 - Columbus Day - (schools closed for students)
 Staff Professional Development
 November 3, 2026 - Election Day - (schools closed for students)
 Staff Professional Development
 November 5-6, 2026 - Schools Closed (NJEA Convention)
 November 11, 2026 - Veteran's Day - Observed
 November 25, 2026 - Thanksgiving Eve (early dismissal for staff & students)
 November 26-27, 2026 - Thanksgiving Recess
 December 1-3, 2026 - Preschool Parent Conferences
 (early dismissal for all preschool students)
 December 23, 2026 - (early dismissal for staff and students)
 December 25, 2026 - Christmas Day (schools closed)
 December 24-31, 2026 - Winter Recess (schools closed)
 January 1, 2027 - New Year's Day (schools closed)
 January 18, 2027 - Martin Luther King Day (schools closed)
 January 29, 2027 - Achieve NJ (early dismissal for students)
 February 12, 2027 - (early dismissal for staff and students)
 February 15-16, 2027 - President's Day (schools closed)
 February 18, 2027 - All Schools Parent Conferences Virtual (alternate date 2/25/27)
 February 19, 2027 - (early dismissal for all schools students & staff (alt. date 2/26/27)
 March 2-4, 2027 - Preschool Parent Conferences
 (early dismissal for all preschool students)
 March 9, 2027 - Eid-al-Fitr (schools closed)
 March 25, 2027 - early dismissal for staff & students
 March 26, 2027 - Good Friday (schools closed)
 March 29 - April 2, 2027 - Spring Recess (schools closed)
 April 16, 2027 - Achieve NJ (early dismissal for students)
 May 7, 2027 - Achieve NJ (early dismissal for students)
 May 17, 2027 - Eid al-Adha (schools closed) ***
 May 28, 2027 - early dismissal for staff & students
 May 31, 2027 - Memorial Day (schools closed)
 June 8, 2027 - Primary Election Day - (schools closed for students)
 Staff Professional Development
 June 18, 2027 - Juneteenth (schools closed)
 June 21-24, 2027 - (early dismissal for students)
 June 24, 2027 - Last day of School
 June 25, 2027 - CHS Graduation

January 2027						
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31						

February 2027						
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March 2027						
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April 2027						
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18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

May 2027						
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

June 2027						
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6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

***NJ Department of Education has made every attempt to ensure the accuracy of the dates. The information has been verified through the use of various sources and some dates may vary due to the lunar calendar.
 There is a total of 183 school days. This School Calendar is tentative, depending on weather conditions and may be modified as required to provide a minimum of 180 days. If additional days are required, they will be taken from the following: beginning, Tuesday, February 16, 2027 then Friday, April 2, 2027, on an as needed basis.

- Schools Closed for All Students and Staff
- Staff Only-Schools Closed for Students
- First Day of School
- Early Dismissal - all students
- Early Dismissal for specific schools - please refer to date details above
- Last Day of School

1/22/26
BOE Approved

PRESCHOOL

September 2, 2026
Preschool Meet & Greet

September 3, 2026
First Day of School for
Preschool students

Bryan Szurlej – Junior

Consistency is key, and that's exactly what Bryan Szurlej has found as a lover of math. "Ever since first grade, it has been my strong point. In third grade, I was the highest Imagine Math participant," said Szurlej (CHS 2027). "I'm probably the most confident in my Math class. I'm interested in engineering because of this strength."

His plans for life after graduation include going to college to major in Engineering. Until then, he strives to stay well-rounded in his interests and activities. Szurlej plays JV Soccer for CHS when he is outside of the classroom. It isn't always easy, and it definitely requires time management.

"One major hurdle was managing everything during the high school soccer season. I would get home around 6 pm every weekday and have to complete one to two hours of homework," said Szurlej. "During this time, I had limited time for myself. Some days, I'd finish my work just to go straight to sleep."

But staying positive and pushing through his commitments has helped. So has looking to the people who raised him for guidance and support.

"My parents definitely inspire me the most," he said. "They always care for me, and I want to treat everyone the same way."

Thomas Bauman – Senior

The saying goes "It takes a village", and the most inspirational villagers in Thomas Bauman's life are his older sisters.

"Amanda, Megan, and Stephany ... always guide me and help me in life, even when they are struggling themselves," said Bauman (CHS 2026). "When my dad passed away, they made sure that I didn't keep to myself. They put their lives aside to take me out and help me get through it."

Bauman joined the Fighting Mustangs as a linebacker and tight end as a freshman. He also joined Track in his junior year after Coach Brown inspired him to try javelin.

"I discovered I was good at it and have been doing it ever since."

His biggest high school hurdle was "growing up without my father. Even though I live with my godparents now, it's difficult not having my biological father in my life."

But his loved ones have given him the necessary tools to take care of himself, like going to the gym.

"When I see progress in my body, it makes me feel like my hard work is paying off," he said. "It definitely translates into other areas of life. It motivates me to go to college, work hard, and push through even when things are difficult."



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See the Next Gen of Mustang Basketball when CCMS battles WWMS at the Clifton High School gym, Feb. 7. The 8 am event opens with the combined chorus of the two

CCMS

V



The CCMS girls bball team from left: manager Gianna Aruedas, Antonella Vaca, Emelyn Alvarez, Dareen Jaffal, Kendra Soriano Baez, Juliet Georges, Janeilyis Gomez, Victoria Khawan Kalousie, Scarlett Vera, Coach Brianna DeCicco. **The CCMS boys bball team from front left:** Sidney Dollar-Steele, Jad Hamdan, Christopher Meade, Enrique Benitez, Max Becerril-Moreno, Jayce Acosta. **Middle:** Anthony Frankiv, Dyllen Scott, Chase Corbin, Arian Mujica-Maldonado, Yoldany Dume, Emy Luna, Jenfrielle Ramos, Thai Poggi. **Top:** Coach Jones, Isaiah Mann, Mathew Tobias, Julien Marmolejos, Raiyan Hamdan.



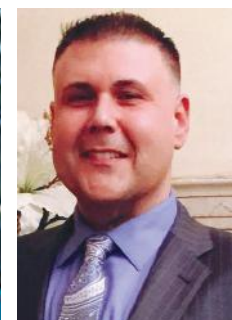
S WWMS

schools singing the National Anthem. The girls game begin after and the boys game follows. There will also be performances by the middle school dance programs.

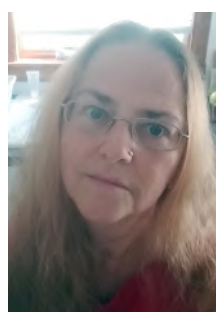


The WWMS girls bball team kneeling from left: Cyrine Alsaleh, Emma Wood, Gabriella Fusco, Heily Ibanez, Alexa Reyes and Ayah Louhab. **Top:** Gianna Genova, Nhyria Ansah, Jaylin Batista, Victoria Cobo, Mia McNinch, Hanna Pena Cassadee Van Der Horn and Delayah Perez. **The WWMS boys bball team** kneeling from left: Zach Kokora, Brody De Genarro, Carnelo Ferrandiz, Christian Bitar, Chris Diaz, Luca Calello. **Middle:** Julian Flores, Darsh Patel, Nicholas Contreras, Liam Crucetia, Samuel Moreta, King Brinson, Yasir Johnson, Aydin Gomez, Manager Angelyn Baez. **Top:** Manager Liana Podgorczyk, Coach Dan Calandrillo, Xavier Rivera, Lucas Moreno, Jalen Taveras, Janziel Franceschi, Alan Urena.

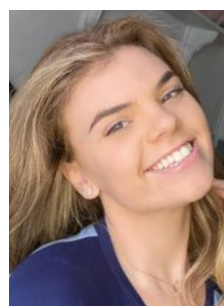
Birthdays & Celebrations - February 2026



Scarlett Tomaiko celebrates on Feb. 4. Her brother **Zach** and cousin **Chase Blasko** share a birthday on Feb. 17. **Alexa Manzueta** turns 12 on Feb. 12! **Jayden Wilkins** turns 16 on Feb. 8. **Ernie Rodrigues** turned 50 on Jan. 14. **The Lux siblings**—**Eric** turns 30 on Feb. 3 and **Renee** will be 24—on Feb. 14.



Ashley Rose Montague is 20 on Feb. 6. **Christena (Ludvik) Peters**, CHS 1973, turns 71 on Feb. 18. **Jo Ann Bellini** celebrates her 65th on Feb 22. **Maxine Presto** turns 38 on Feb. 29. **Brinda Chauhan** celebrates a birthday on Feb. 20. **Chris Voit** turns 18 on Feb. 1.



Happy 26th Birthday, **Alison Moran** on Feb. 10. **Bodhi Latham** turns 7 on Feb. 20.

Diane Di Pietro	2/4
John Nittolo	2/5
Richie Szepietowski	2/5
Courtney Carlson.....	2/6
Don Knapp.....	2/6
Joseph DeSomma	2/6
Ashley Rose Montague	2/6
Robert D'Alessio.....	2/7
Nicole Tahan.....	2/7
Tara Fueshko.....	2/8
Natalie Pych.....	2/8
Jamie Carr	2/9
Craig Grieco	2/9
Steven Becker.....	2/10
Bryan Kelly	2/10
Matthew Seitz.....	2/10
Valentine Le Ster.....	2/11
Sarah Mikolajczyk.....	2/11
Nick Zecchino	2/11
Joseph Hilla.....	2/12



Gianna Louise turns 4 on Feb. 1. **James Payton Fogle-Hrina** turns 2 on Feb. 1. Parents are **Steven Hrina** and **Sharian Fogle**.

Alison Degen.....	2/1
Robyn Feldman	2/1
Jack Houston	2/1
Kristin Reilly	2/1
Mary Jane Varga.....	2/1
Emil Soltis, Jr.....	2/2
Joseph Fierro	2/3
Dwayne Williams.....	2/3
Catherine Grace Burns.....	2/4

Anthony Musleh.....	2/12
Dolores Rando	2/12
Ixiana Westfield.....	2/12
John Hodorovych.....	2/13
Amin Zamlout.....	2/13
Mark Gallo.....	2/14
Jeanette Ann Saia.....	2/14



Sister **Donna Hawrylko** celebrates Feb. 25. **Aria Federle** turns 15 on Feb. 15. **Emma Tamas** turns 82 on Feb. 26 and is pictured with grandkids, from left: **Istvanka, Attila** and triplets **Olivia, Viktoria** and **Emma**.

Orest Luzniak	2/14
Christine Canavan	2/15
Chickie Curtis	2/15
Ashley Brandecker.....	2/17
David Fazio	2/17
Leann Perez	2/17
Lorraine Rothe	2/17
Michael Del Re	2/18
Richie Bandurski.....	2/19
Stephanie (Peterson)Yoda.....	2/19
Michael Papa.....	2/20
Robert Mosciszko	2/21
Taylor Jesch	2/22
Diana Murphy.....	2/22
John T. Saccoman	2/22
Robert Adamo.....	2/24
Eileen Feldman.....	2/24
Kimberly Mistretta.....	2/24
Robert Krupinski.....	2/25
Claudia Azula	2/26
Kimberly Gasior.....	2/26
Jayke Williams	2/26
Joseph J. Schmidt	2/27
Brittany Helwig	2/27
Joyce Penaranda	2/27
Brittany Pinter	2/27
Lauren Ricca	2/27
Charlie Galluzzo	2/28
Mark Zecchino.....	2/28

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ON-THE-JOB



Christopher Columbus Middle School Career Club visited Newark Liberty International Airport, guided by club advisor and teacher Yokasta “Kathy” Guillen. Within Terminal A, staff gave a tour and talk highlighting aviation careers and explained how Newark Liberty blends travel, culture and community. The Mustangs pictured above toured a United Airlines aircraft, which was led by Clifton resident and United Airlines pilot Mike Bangma. Capt. Bangma welcomed students into the plane, including the first class cabin and the cockpit, where he and the kids discussed technical and professional requirements of being a pilot.

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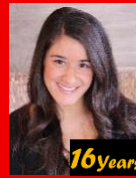
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