

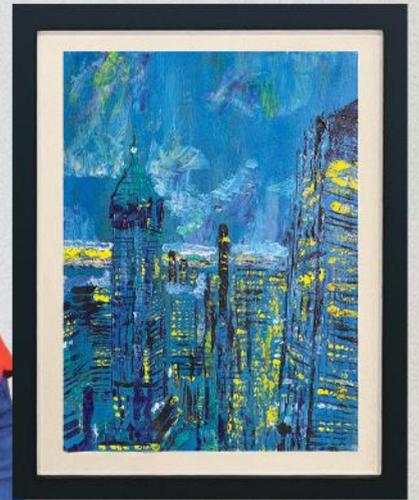
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Mandi Bevando
with Banjo,
Aneta Pierog-Sudol,
Beth Kearney, seated.



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3 Beds | 3 Baths | List Price \$799,000



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54 Village Rd

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Richfield Section | Clifton

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BREAK IT!

From the Editor,
Tom Hawrylko, Sr.



It's the 11th hour in ON3's residential redevelopment phase and guess what? The Mayor and Council will vote on April 7 to change Clifton's affordable housing formula. This idea won't fix what some think it will—which is to provide low-income housing for Clifton residents. But by passing the ordinance they may just break this project.

Clifton leaders are reacting to a *suggestion* from the state to add 20% affordable units on projects of 10 or more units. ON3's hi-rise proposal plans for 1,078 apartments. That means 200 units would be set aside as affordable units.

Federal and NJ laws make affordable units available to *anyone with qualifying income from anywhere*. As a result, Gene Diaz of ON3 wrote, "...the tax dollars of Clifton residents end up funding housing for Bergen, Essex, Sussex and Passaic Counties and beyond."

Also, Clifton is one of 62 NJ municipalities designated as a "qualified urban aid municipality," which have fulfilled their "fair share" of affordable housing due to Clifton's density of low-income residents and aging housing stock.

By not mandating affordable housing, ON3 does not get over on Clifton. Developers contribute to Clifton's Affordable Housing Trust Fund with every project. With a \$2.7 million balance, about \$2.25 million is projected through 2035 from developer's fees. That money—some \$500,000 each year—goes back to *Clifton homeowners* as grants or loans to fund rehabs on existing neighborhood housing.

ON3 is building at great risk and with the potential for great reward. Clifton leaders should reject the new affordable housing mandate, support the project, and the city's residents will enjoy the ratables ON3 will generate.

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Contributing Writers

Ariana Puzzo, Joe Hawrylko, Irene Jarosewich, Tom Szieber, Jay Levin, Michael C. Gabriele, Jack DeVries, Pat Alex, Robert Niessen

Editor & Publisher
Tom Hawrylko, Sr.

Art Director
Ken Peterson

Associate Editor & Social Media Mgr.
Ariana Puzzo

Business Mgr.
Irene Kulyk

Graphic Design Intern
Michael Shimabukuro



From Accident to Action

ADVOCATES FOR BRAIN-INJURY CURE

By Ariana Puzzo

There may be two parts to Dennis Benigno's journey of grief and fatherhood, but there are also unwavering through lines: love and openness.

The first part of Benigno's broader journey is up to the time his son Dennis John got hurt in 1984 at age 15. The second part in the last four decades is how Benigno has taken a terrible accident and transformed it into advocacy work to help find a brain injury cure.

Those first 15 years of his son's life are hard to remember. "You go through life ... and don't expect a tragedy to happen or what did happen," said Benigno, 82. "Our whole life was about him [from when he was] 15 until two years ago when he passed."

Dennis passed away on Jan. 29, 2024 at age 55. A life-long resident, he attended Christopher Columbus Junior High and played football before he was struck by a car as a pedestrian. The tragic event took place at 3:20 pm on Aug. 22, 1984 while Dennis was walking home from his football

physical. The car that struck him had swerved to avoid hitting another person.

While the event altered his life and his loved ones' lives, it also transformed the scope of brain injury care, awareness, and research not only in New Jersey but across the country. Benigno and wife Rosalind cared for Dennis for 40 years. But they also created the Coalition for Brain Injury Research, a charitable foundation, in 2000. Learn more at brainjurycure.org.

All money raised has supported advanced neuroscience programs at universities around the country, including Rutgers University and the University of Texas. And while it's one way that they ensure Dennis' legacy endures, Benigno said talking about it all also helps. "He never talked about what he wanted to be when he grew up," said Benigno, "but he was just a good kid. He was good in school, with all A's, and respectful. That is how he went through life, and our daughter is the same way today."



As an infant, then at Clifton High, to photos after the accident, decades of photos of Dennis and the Benigno family.

Inspiring Change

The Benignos, who married in 1964, both grew up in Garfield and moved to Clifton in 1972. The couple took up residence on Hazel St. with young kids, Kim (CHS 1983) and Dennis. Kim's now married to husband William Lyons and has adult twin sons, Ethan and Jack.

Dennis, who was just a little over a week away from starting 10th grade at the big high school, was a member of the Class of 1987. As his parents organize his things nearly 42 years later, a few items paint a picture of a boy who had different interests and deserved to explore them. 

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From Accident to Action

“He used to collect stamps and coins,” said Benigno. “There was a stamp collection. Not an avid one, but we had bought him a book and he said, ‘I think I’m going to collect stamps.’ He was not an artist yet [either], but he did have interest in artwork.” It’s hard for Benigno to identify the parts of his son that he remembers before the accident since it evokes feelings of sadness, but he acknowledged that there is a catharsis in discussing him. It also helps remembering what he meant to others.

“I feel like I had two sons. My son from 15 years old until he passed and my son from when he was born to when he got hurt,” said Benigno. “A lot of people liked Dennis, because he was a good person. He was considerate of others. He was that kind of son, and I think he [would’ve stayed] that way for the rest of his life. There is no way of knowing what he would’ve been,” he continued, “but we remind people of what a good person he was and what he inspired after the accident.”

Although Dennis could not communicate after the accident, the Benignos believed that he could understand certain things. He had a severe Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and was in a minimally conscious state. Lying in a raised hospital bed on the first floor of the Benignos’ Hazel St. home, he seemed aware, but it was unclear to what extent.



Along with their dedication to Dennis’ care, the assistance of nurses and volunteers meant that Dennis wasn’t in any pain and there was no shortage of love around him. He was also home, important after spending several months in the hospital and then in rehabilitation after the accident.

Even after nothing more could be done to physically improve Dennis’ set of circumstances, the Benignos’ leveraged the experience to help others receive more positive prognoses in the years to come.

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Advocates Jim Haraka and Dennis Benigno.

Creating the Blueprint

It started with Benigno watching the news. “Hillary Clinton had started something for breast cancer research for women. I turned the TV off and said to my wife, ‘We should start a coalition for brain injury research,’” recalled Benigno.

The Coalition for Brain Injury Research remains active and a source of information for others in and beyond our community, but its activity has changed over the years. The coalition organized walk-a-thons and beefsteak dinners, as well as connected with politicians who served on the local, state, and federal levels.

During those years, New Jersey became the first state to provide a continuous source of money to state facilities to fund brain injury research. Benigno also spent years spearheading an effort to establish the New Jersey Commission on Brain Injury Research. Its funding source was a \$1 surcharge added to all New Jersey motor vehicle traffic violations, which was then funneled into supporting brain injury research. Learn more at nj.gov/health/njcbir.

Advocating for research and aware-

ness was never linear or without obstacles, but there were major milestones that signified a shared commitment between the Benignos and others in a position to effect change. On Jan. 3, 2004, then Governor Jim McGreevey publicly signed the Brain Injury Research Act, which was approved in Trenton, in the Benignos’ modest Clifton home.

“It was a great day,” Benigno told Clifton Merchant in our May 2011 issue, “and as a result of the Act, now more than \$3.5-4 million each year go to New Jersey research facilities such as Robert Wood Johnson or UMDNJ specifically targeted for research on brain injury repair.”

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From Accident to Action

The NJ Commission on Brain Injury Research also came out of the passage of the Act. The commission's members are appointed by the governor and Benigno served as its executive director for five years, beginning in 2005, before becoming a volunteer commissioner.

"People from other states come to New Jersey to see how we did it," he told us in 2011.

Another dedicated supporter was the late Congressman Bill Pascrell, who Benigno worked with to convince Congress to focus on the problem. Pascrell pushed at Benigno's urging to establish a Congressional Brain Injury Task Force in 2001, which he co-chaired.

As the years went on, the hearings held to discuss an increase of brain injuries among returning combat veterans helped raise the public profile of the task force. Simply put, bringing awareness and speaking up shifted the priorities. And a lot of that goes back to Hazel St.

"I always equate it. Have they found anything yet? No, but they have found cer-



Walkathons and a visit with Christopher Reeve.



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tain procedures and research protocols that one day may lead to it,” said Benigno. “How many years have they been researching cancer cures? You don’t stop, but a lot of treatment comes along the way.”

“The job is not done. It may take another 50 years, or another few months. That’s the point of research,” he continued. “The local level to me was always the catalyst.”

Although the energy level of the grassroots coalition has waned as they’ve aged, Benigno said their “will” to see change has not. They’ve raised \$414,000 for neuroscience research institutes like the University of Texas Medical Branch (\$257,000), Rutgers University (\$90,000), University of Wisconsin (\$32,000), Burnham Institute (\$25,000), and the University of Kentucky (\$10,000).

“I hope the coalition goes on and so do [others]. It was so personal and family-oriented,” said Benigno. “But being average, everyday people, and not being a celebrity who gets people to listen to you, [we’ve done well]. [That’s down to] mine and my wife’s drives and always thinking about our son and how we can help others.”

It Takes A Village

The statistics are sobering, but they only paint part of the picture.

According to the International Brain Injury Association, one million Americans are treated and released from hospital emergency departments due to TBI. Roughly 5.3 million Americans live with disability related to TBI.

The highest rate of injury typically occurs between ages 15 to 24. Studies have also indicated a link to males incurring TBI more often than females. But a brain injury can happen to anyone, whether it’s a motor vehicle accident, sports injuries, seniors falling, or slipping.

It’s the human component that has made a difference. It’s families, like the Benignos, who saw the low awareness of TBI and realized it might be connected to a misconception between injury and disease.

A brain injury is different from diseases of the brain, such as Alzheimer’s or brain cancer. The brain can theoretically be repaired with stem cell technology, genetic research, and nerve cell rejuvenation as avenues of research



In 2004, Dennis Sr., Rosalind with Dennis, daughter Kim and her husband Bill Lyons with Ethan and Jack.

to pursue. Rosalind added previously that finding ways to repair TBIs received low priority because victims cannot speak. There were no high-profile people to publicize the problem, such as Christopher Reeve for spinal cord injuries or Jerry Lewis for muscular dystrophy.

So when the opportunity came to advocate for their son, they raised their own voices.

“I took up the advocacy part,” said Benigno. “I went out and lobbied the state senators when I realized there was no way to repair the injured brain.”

Rosalind took up Dennis’ care. Alongside the nurses and doctors, it’s Rosalind who Benigno credited as holding it “all together” for those 40 years.

“If it wasn’t for her, none of this would have been done. She’s stronger than I am to be honest,” said Benigno. “She took up that mantle willingly and said, ‘I’m going to do this. You do what you have to do and, this way, maybe we can get something done.’”

The hope was always to help Dennis as brain injury research broke new ground but, in terms of their own journeys, he said it “worked out” for them. Getting through each day was possible by staying active since there was always something to do.

That includes the last two years of Dennis’ life at St. Joseph’s University Medical Center.

“They were good to us. The community, [St. Brendan’s] church, the city, and the hospital. I can’t say enough about the caring of people in general,” said Benigno. “[At one time], neighbors were coming to the house three times a week to help exercise him. I don’t think you can get through it without that kind of help. It made things a little easier.”

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History & Creativity Take Flight @ CCMS



By Ariana Puzzo

Art soars through the halls of Christopher Columbus Middle School, no matter the decade. But the real surprise for CCMS Art teacher Jeffrey Labriola was when he discovered birds up in the school’s attic.

Bird paintings, that is.

Labriola, currently in his 25th year teaching art at CCMS, spent 10 years doing stage scenery for the CCMS musicals. In 2019, he was moving props into the attic above the auditorium with his friend Mike Molner when he discovered four spring-themed paintings on wood.

They were all being used as floor boards.

“They were face down and dirty, but I could see their beauty through the dust,” recalled Labriola (CHS 1997). “Under one of the paintings was a stack of bird paintings. The bird paintings all had names on them, and one had the year 1961.”

He remembered finding the art in relatively good condition despite being remarkably dusty, which was fortunate since they were in the shape of birds with wings and beaks.

“I wanted to learn more about these beautiful projects and the artists who made them in this building when it was Clifton High School,” said Labriola.

Labriola’s hope is to find the Mustang alums whose artwork is shown on the next few pages. If you or a family member recognize one of the birds or remember creating work like this at the “old high school,” email JeLabriola@cliftonschoools.net or call the main office at 973-470-2360. An artist-student meet-up is anticipated for May or early June.



Past Meets Present

CCMS was the final stop for many years before Mustangs raced into adulthood.

The last graduating class on Piaget Ave. was in 1962 before the Class of 1963 transitioned to then a brand new CHS on Colfax Ave. The students whose artwork Labriola found lived in a different Clifton than ours today. But some things have remained consistent.

“Clifton has always supported the arts in our schools. That is a very good thing and something that has remained a constant in our community,”



Among the artists from the Clifton High School yearbook of 1961, we found Janet Magliacane, Phyllis Gamble and Sandra Mueller. On this page are samples of work saved by Jeff Labriola.





Holding the artwork, which is some-65 years old, are CCMS students from Jeff Labriola's art classes and alumna Janet Maglicane Passariello, who was reunited with her artwork.

explained Labriola. “The arts help support the school district and showcase the wonderful things happening in classrooms every day.”

Labriola is proud of how many art classes rely on “tried-and-true techniques” to help teach skills to middle schoolers while also developing the students’ natural abilities.

“There is something special about those traditional methods and the creativity they help inspire,” said Labriola. “I also think it’ll be especially interesting to have conversations about how Clifton has evolved since the 1960s — physically, culturally, religiously, and in so many other ways.”

“Many of our current students and their families are new to Clifton,” he continued, “and I think they will truly enjoy the opportunity to hear stories about what Clifton was like ‘back in the day.’”

The reason why it took some time to happen is owing to the coronavirus pandemic and major CCMS construction projects that delayed Labriola’s “appeal” to the community to identify and reconnect with the artists. Labriola credited the support of both Principal Vanessa Gaba and Supervisor Jason Leshowitz for making the artist-seeking endeavor possible.

Labriola envisions a morning breakfast, where the original artists can speak to his present-day advanced art students. It would give students the opportunity to discover

who painted “these lost treasures” and the reason why they were painted.

“Was it for a spring concert? Was it one class?” said Labriola, proposing scenarios. “Why would they have been saved?”

It would also be a time for students to share what it’s like in schools today, working and learning in new ways with Chromebooks and other forms of technology. Labriola would also like to return the paintings to their rightful owners if they want them.

“That gathering will really make my heart happy. Teaching today, just as it always has been, is a rewarding career,” said Labriola. “Every day, I try to build strong relationships with my students. Students are our legacy, and we shape their school experience through our daily interactions.”

Labriola went on to say that he’s heard “many wonderful things” about former Art teacher Ms. Gardner. It was her students who created the paintings. Labriola also found supplies labeled “Gardner” when he first started at CCMS over two decades ago.

“I hope that I can be the kind of teacher that my students will remember 65 years from now and say, ‘He was a good guy. He gave his students and CCMS his all,’” said Labriola. “If that’s how I’m remembered, then I know I did my job.” For news and updates, follow @ccms_clifton on Instagram.

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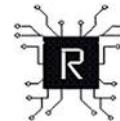
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Bishal Karki

doesn't let any
one label define him.

By Ariana Puzzo



In the Army Reserves, Bishal Karki honored his ancestors who served before him. As a model and philanthropist, he has participated in Style Icon, a competition to benefit the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

But philanthropy started at home. As a boy in Nepal, Karki watched his father, Birahi, create a charity after Karki's grandmother passed away. The Phool Maya Karki Foundation helped kids, especially orphans without access to education, water, and food.

"I would definitely like to work with my father's foundation," said Karki (CHS 2022). "Continue providing basic necessities like water, food, and shelter. ... When people don't have the basic necessities, it feels like a crime and sin. If we're not helping them, then what are we doing as humans? And it doesn't have to be just in Nepal. [The need is] all over the world."

Broad Horizons

Growing up in Nepal was a “whole different world.” Karki had younger parents who were stern about his academics, but his father also had a unique career. “He started singing at the age of 13, I believe. My mom and dad ran away together at the age of 19 and had me at the age of 20,” said Karki, 21. “Growing up, it was my father mostly being out in concerts ... while my mom raised me.”

Birahi and Santa both had clear expectations, like being good and studying hard, and Karki “had nothing short of a 4.0.” He was also expected to follow Birahi’s lead. Birahi didn’t want his son in music, so he pursued acting and it guided him to “where I’m doing all the stuff that I want to do.”

It was a different environment in Nepal. His school’s English courses gave him an early grasp of grammar, which helped at age 13 when the three of them and his younger sister, Himani (CHS 2025), immigrated to the U.S.

“One of the things that people dream about is being outside of [Nepal] because of the political and economic state of the country,” said Karki.

Birahi had already started applying for himself with other singers and celebrities, but then he decided to try and get the whole family approved together. After building up documents and getting approved for an O-1 Extraordinary Ability visa, he applied with all of them and it was swiftly approved.

“I was excited about it, because I feel like my parents always prepared me for that exact moment,” said Karki. “You’re gonna get out one day.”

Building Resilience

The family lived in New York until the coronavirus pandemic. Moving to Clifton meant finding a house, and his junior year at CHS meant learning remotely and struggling for “a chance to fully explore himself.” The pandemic stopped a lot, including his strong grades.

“I feel like I lost so many things at that time, including my passion for things,” he said. “I began playing video games. I no longer do that.”

But senior year was “one of my best years ... in America.” He met friends and spent time at the library, participated in the Robotics Club, and spoke to teachers who he came to admire.

“[My teachers] understood who I was as a student and would push me to do my best,” said Karki. “They knew what I was capable of.”

Yet Karki was at a crossroads. After traveling back to Nepal for about two months, his parents asked what he planned to do after graduation.

“My response was: ‘I’m not too sure. I know I want to go to college, but I think I want a year to understand myself,’” he recalled. “So they asked, ‘Do you want to join the Army?’”



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Bishal Karki

“In Nepal, we’re known to be soldiers ... so I was mostly paying respect to that,” Karki added. “I knew my grandfather and family had been a part of the Army.”

After speaking with a recruiter and working to gain 15 lbs. in two months, Karki enlisted. He was a Combat Engineer 12B, which meant it was his duty as a specialized soldier to build, demolish, and clear obstacles for friendly forces.

“I thought it would be the type of job where you design stuff and sit back and relax, but it’s the exact opposite. We had to be in the field at all times,” said Karki. “Experiencing all that brought me back to life. I was more grateful for the stuff that I did back home and all of my freedoms.” Basic Training then four weeks of training were in St. Louis, where he wore T-shirts and shorts to run in the winter.

“It required a lot of discipline in that regard. Doing as they said,” said Karki. “I appreciated all of that. It built resilience in me.”

As a reservist, he returned home and reported to his assigned base in New York monthly to stay active. His service concluded after four years in the Reserves, and he realized that being able to “tolerate” his training didn’t mean it was his path. It did show Karki what it means to rely on others as part of a “real brotherhood, and it taught me to be very humble and stay grounded. It’s ... living every single moment and ... embracing it.”

Giving Back with Gratitude

Karki doesn’t take his education for granted. He’s a junior at MSU, studying Business Administration with a concentration in Finance and a minor in Computer Science. But he’s also booking modeling and acting gigs.

“That’s what I’m meant to do,” he said.

Karki is signed with Hoboken-based Vie Model + Talent Agency. Earlier this year, he got work in a music video and had finished a short film while being on book for another one. For updates on projects, follow @b1.shal on Instagram.

But it all comes back to finding ways to do for others. During the Style Icon competition, Karki made it as far as the quarter-finals and those involved managed to host multiple events, even reaching Nepali communities. He was part of raising over \$15,000 from the community and amassed more than three to four million views across social media.

“Ever since I was a little kid, [my parents] made me extremely aware of the privileges we have,” said Karki. “To be blessed with food, shelter, and education. They always [made sure I was] very grateful.”

“When I did see people without access to that, it made me very mindful,” he continued. “The first thing we wanted to do was step up and help them. I grew up like that because of my parents. It exposed me to the good someone like my father could do if you put your mind to it.”

Generosity is something he sees in Clifton, where he lives, and Karki admires how people here are “all extremely helpful. It’s a great community with, all-around, just great people.”



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A Community OF Make-Believe



By Ariana Puzzo

Just one day with Mandi Bevando and her puppets is enough to transport people of any age into a world of pure imagination. That's what the artist and puppeteer counts on, and it's part of what she encourages by standing front and center rather than hiding behind a curtain.

"A lot of my stories are cardboard characters and scenery. I like the idea that the storytelling process also seems tangible to kids," said Bevando, 48. "I try not to hide [behind a curtain], encouraging the kids to see that they can do their own storytelling."

"Look; this is just cardboard that she painted and turned into a car. You can do this, too.' Some of [the puppets] are flashy and things they would not be capable of [right now]," she continued, "but there's a balance between the two."

Bevando, a resident since 2009, owns and operates Dabbling Brook LLC. The company merges visual and performing arts through "products and experiences that encourage Play, Imagination, and Artistry."

The goal is to encourage people of all ages to "dabble in the new and explore their own creative abilities without self-judgment", which is something that Bevando struggled with as a young girl.

"I love stories, and my imagination was always in the clouds. I didn't think of it as being art, per se," said Bevando. "I played and imagined."

To find Dabbling Brook's services, visit dabblingbrook.org. They include Interactive Storytelling, Puppet Storytimes, Crafting Workshops, and Camps & Enrichment Programming. For the latest info, follow @dabbling_brook on Instagram.



A Creative Bloodline

Rather than strictly embracing the arts, Bevando noted that she spent quite a few years with a perspective that discounted what she did.

During her childhood in Southern California, she compared herself often to the talents exhibited by her mother, Kathy, and brother Shane, who she described as a person who could pick up an instrument and know how to play it.

Kathy, who was a hairdresser and "worked her tail off in the salon", was also a Type-A artist. Bevando added that everything Kathy "did and touched" was beautiful and creative.

"Wrapping a present. Painting. Fancy, elaborate hair-dos on people," Bevando listed. "She told me stories. She was really creative."

And that creativity continues in Bevando's family today. The self-described Master Dabbler is married to Kelly Bevando, 53, a graphic designer and Dabbler Extraordinaire whose talents have elevated Dabbling Brook's shows.

Kelly enjoyed arts like calligraphy, understanding perspective, and photography while in school. Today, he can be found doing anything from baking bread or thumb picking his banjo to carving a sculpture out of wood or breaking things down to build them back up "better than before."

Their kids are no less passionate in their endeavors. Kayden, 25, graduated from PCTI in 2018 and studied



civil engineering at NJIT. He does project management in Brooklyn and has always loved architecture, nature, and gaming. He's often designed board games and perfected game plays, scenarios, and themes. Photography is also one of his major hobbies.

"He loves street photography and enjoys trying to find new ways to capture these structures," said Bevando. "Photography is also a fun hobby to pair with travel and adventure."

Sadie, 23, is a member of the CHS Class of 2020. She studied Hospitality, Sports, Events, and Tourism at Montclair State and is passionate about event planning. As a volunteer coordinator for an organization that assists individuals and their families with special needs, she is able to "create themed interactive events to engage residents and volunteers in creative experiences."

Bevando added that her daughter loves creating elaborately themed costumes and baking to attempt new recipes and explore flavors and techniques from other cultures.

As for Bevando, working with puppets began when she took her first puppetry class in 2014 and fell in love with how they could be utilized as a communication tool.

"The magic of puppetry is in how it can bring a story or character to life," said Bevando, "and transport you into the story."

Pulling the Strings

Long before puppetry, there was a dedication to the performing arts.

Bevando's childhood was filled with dance and musicals. She later became a cosmetologist and a platform artist at hair shows, then she volunteered as a mother to create magical experiences for children.

"I've always loved creating large paper mache structures and world building," said Bevando. "My passion for creating artistic experiences for people led to the workshops that I now offer through my company." Many of her puppets are hand-made. Some plush puppets have foams and



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furs, and she's also created marionettes with wood. Upcycled materials — like a milk jug for a dog's head — aren't unusual.

"I create with what I find around," said Bevando. "That's my favorite part; creating the characters and the worlds."

That creativity, and a desire to surround herself with passionate artists, led her to the Clifton Association of Artists. She joined in 2024 and became the corresponding secretary, creating their monthly newsletter. Her newsletters highlight the news and events in our community of artists, plus pictures.

Thirty out of 84 members regularly attend meetings on the first Monday of each month, from October through May. Meetings are 7 pm at the Lester Herrschaft Center, 900 Clifton Ave. Yearly membership is \$25. Guest fee is \$3. For membership, write Tom Dzubina at caacliftonnj@gmail.com or call 973-477-9418. All skill levels are welcome. More information: cliftonnj.org/215/Clifton-Association-of-Artists.

"We strengthen our community of artists by sharing projects and works, offering support and guidance to one another," said Bevando. "We've been looking to grow our membership, and to see community engagement."



Mandi Bevando with husband Kelly and Kayden and Sadie.

Last summer they had a booth at the Van Houten Ave. Street Fair and also have new signage.

"It is really nice to have a sense of belonging, especially in a digital era. The Association offers a way to stay connected in person, which can help us all not feel isolated," she said. "It makes you feel hope for humanity beyond the mayhem that may blur your day-to-day experiences."



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Celebrating & Cultivating Unity & Diversity

By Ariana Puzzo

From her earliest coloring books and receiving her first coloring pencils, Aneta Pierog-Sudol knew that she was going to become an artist.

Her mother got both for her when she was five years old and growing up in Poland. But how she viewed herself as an artist and what she would become has shifted over time. Her first idea was to become a fashion designer and interior designer. Until she discovered her talent as a teacher.

But before that, someone else needed to see what she could do.

“One of my teachers discovered me in the fourth grade,” said Pierog-Sudol, 51. “[I participated in] so many competitions and contests. My first competition was international, between Poland and Slovakia, and I won 2nd Place in the group of I think first to fourth graders.”

“It was a mixed-media project. I even used toothpaste as a white paint,” she chuckled. “I grew up in Communist time in Poland. That was a time when we didn’t have everything.”

Pierog-Sudol worked hard to make her dreams come true, which included studying art after she finished eighth grade. She described a different education system to our own, where there were art high schools that allowed students to select techniques, similar to majors.

As she continued in her studies, Pierog-Sudol would study at the Art Institute of the Pedagogical University in

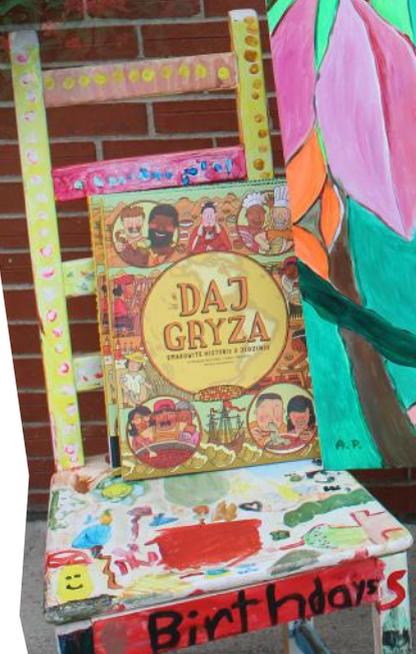
Cracow, where she majored in photography and painting. She later graduated with a master’s degree in Art Education in 1999.

Today, she is an art teacher, teaching artist, photographer, party designer, and a sculptor. She owns Rustic Square LLC – Rustic Square Art Studio, located at 9 Village Square E. See what classes and events are coming up at rusticsquare.com.

“I really work with the children’s needs [and] I think I have a talent to discover children with special talents,” said Pierog-Sudol. “My idea is to do all my classes as custom in my studio. Children don’t work with me; I work with the children that I’ve got.”

Pierog-Sudol has also worked closely with seniors for the past year and, although she has the degree in Poland, she hopes to become a certified art therapist in the U.S.

“I would love to work clinically with children and adults through art,” she said. “[Toward their] healing.”



A Tapestry of Love and Support

If there's one thing that Pierog-Sudol hopes to teach people of all ages, it's how art can heal and help them in their everyday lives.

"I'm an immigrant and during the years that I've been here, I've found through art that you can help people adapt between cultures," said Pierog-Sudol. "My dream is to show how to make a community better [through this] diversity in professional places, institutions, and communities."

Pierog-Sudol has lived in the U.S. since 2002, saying the decision to relocate was the "hardest decision in my life." She was a successful teacher and artist, also working as a journalist, when she lived in Poland.

She encourages raising your children by emphasizing the importance of art and reading. She continued, stating that many people view art for children as a "break to keep them busy", but it holds as much importance as math, geography, music, or sports.

"It can do everything for your future and all of your life," said Pierog-Sudol. "Not everyone likes specific subjects, but what I'll see is if children get interested in art, people get scared and say, 'Oh, they're going to be an artist and won't have a life, money, or a job.'"

Yet Pierog-Sudol has witnessed the opposite with some of her past students, in Poland and the US becoming inter-

nationally-known artists with their own businesses. One former student who attended Pierog-Sudol's classes in Poland is now an interior designer for Chanel in Paris.

"Her parents believed in her since she was little," emphasized Pierog-Sudol. "They didn't try to change her interests."

Neither did Pierog-Sudol's parents, Wladyslaw and Emilia, who still live in Poland with most of her family. Pierog-Sudol recalls receiving her first camera and believes that photography is still where her strengths lie. She's also returned to painting and embraced other mediums, such as sewing and dry felting.

And if you're a regular attendee or supporter of art programming at the Clifton Arts Center, you may have heard that she led a workshop for kids ages 9-15 last month and taught kids how to create their own paper-cut Łowicz-style pisanka. The style of art is a distinctive form of Polish Easter egg decoration.

But her passion for teaching exists all year long. She founded Rustic Square LLC in 2013 as a wedding photographer and party designer and florist. But Pierog-Sudol's dream was to open a studio.

From starting out in her kitchen with four students to renting a studio in Wallington back in 2016, her fourth and most recent location is the ideal location for the Clifton resident.

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Aneta favors black and white photography. Above left, is her Orava Castle in Slovakia. Aneta with husband Peter and son Szymon.

Unity Through Expression

And she keeps hustling to make it work. A few years ago, she taught at New Hope School, 181 Colfax Ave., while managing Rustic Square Art Studio. Pierog-Sudol tries now to work as close to full time as possible at the studio, supplementing it with going out to get contracts in multiple communities. Her classes generally range from eight to 12 students, depending on their ages.

She works twice per month with seniors and runs art classes at the Passaic Neighborhood Center For Women. At the studio, she works by herself with the exception of inviting artists throughout the year for some special events.

“I have a few friends who like doing things that are really interesting,” said Pierog-Sudol. “Now I have also met some new girls in Clifton like [Mandi Bevando and Beth Kearney]. I hope that we continue doing something together.”

The three women connected through the Clifton Association of Artists last year. Pierog-Sudol was a member years prior before she stepped back. She runs @cliftonassociationofartists on Instagram with event and meeting updates.

“I came to the Clifton Association of Artists, because you automatically have more options to create and show your art,” said Pierog-Sudol, “[as well as] meet different people in different communities and towns with different perspectives, heritages, and cultures.”

One of the ways that Pierog-Sudol hopes to showcase that tapestry of diversity is through her own artwork with one of her forthcoming projects. The project’s concept involves showing two photographs of her parents.

“My dream is to make a huge [version] of two photographs of my parents’ hands,” she said. “I would get a grant to print out the huge photographs on canvas’ and find a place to show them for the 250th anniversary of the United States. The two pictures represent where I came from.”

Unity and origin stories also come together at the Clifton Arts Center, which has become a hub for artistic, social, and cultural togetherness over the past 26 years. When you’re not attending CAA meetings or taking in events, workshops, or exhibitions — there’s the free Sculpture Park.

Open from dawn until dusk, there are over 30 sculptures across the grounds of the Municipal Complex. And there’s always learning happening, whether you’re visiting as a student or just someone who wants to reconnect with nature through public art.

“Clifton has an amazing gallery. I would love to see it running every day with something,” said Pierog-Sudol. “Especially for children and teenagers. People forget about teenagers, but they really need art at [that age].”

“They need to express themselves,” she continued. “Art is an amazing tool to express yourself, show your feelings, and ... open your heart.”



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Exploration & Collaboration

The Little Things Are Art

By Ariana Puzzo

If a supportive community is the most important thing for an artist to have, Beth Kearney has exactly what she needs as an artist and Clifton resident.

Kearney, 51, moved to our city in 2000, and she's spent about 13 years as a member of the Clifton Association of Artists. She first became active and was a Board member while doing their newsletter until life got busier.

"I was spending more time going to meetings and there was not enough time to create, because I was so busy with a young family," said Kearney. "But what I always liked about the Association is how approachable everybody is [and] always willing to help each other out with anything."

Those individuals include CAA President Tom Dzubina and Mike Bertelli, who is a past Clifton Arts Center Advisory Board President.

"If I ever have an art-related question, Tom is willing to help or steer me in the right direction," said Kearney. "It's the same with Mike. They have so much knowledge that they're willing to share so openly. I feel like all the artists in the group have done that."

And Kearney makes plenty of contributions of her own. Described by fellow artist and member Mandi Bevando as "very enthusiastic and a driving force", Kearney is optimistic and hopes to see a broadening variety of members join their ranks.

Part of that is connecting with younger artists so that they can participate and bring a different perspective to the group. It might even include high school student involvement, particularly since a lot of these artists work within digital spaces.

"That's something that very few people do right now in the Association," said Kearney. "So having some members



that work digitally would be helpful and bring something new."

"I think that we're all always learning and growing," she continued. "We've been around for over 60 years and there's always something to learn. Different ideas are always welcome."

Embracing All Art Forms

A point-and-shoot camera was never far from Kearney's reach as a child.

The Glen Ridge native explained that she also did ballet as a child, but she didn't truly explore the visual arts until high school. Her early exposure to culture was thanks to her parents who'd bring her to museums and shows. Art was also simply a part of their everyday lives.

“There was always singing in the house. Mom always sang to us,” said Kearney. “I carried that on, too, when I had children.”

Kearney married her husband, Jon, whom she met in college, in 1997. The couple have three children, the two oldest ones being musicians: Ian (CHS 2021), Lily (CHS 2024), and Braden, who’s a junior at CHS.

Kearney studied Film and Photography during her undergraduate years, but she also credited Hampshire College for doing something unique at the time. Unlike most schools, there weren’t tests or grades. Students did graduate-level work by creating an individualized education plan that was project-based and paper-based.

“You basically have your own thesis that you create with whatever resources you have,” said Kearney. “I ended up doing an animation film that was on film that incorporated experimental film techniques.”

Her project incorporated clay-mation and sound, where every frame was separate and she had to manually layer her shots. She was also able to supplement her education with courses from five other colleges, providing her with an “expansive education [and] great experience.”

Later, she earned her master’s degree from NYU Steinhardt and worked at the Tisch School of the Arts in the Animation Department and then the Special Programs Office until Ian was born. Over the years, Kearney has taught classes at the Clifton Recreation Center and most recently joined the staff at the Clifton Arts Center.

As someone who enjoys exploring different art forms and mediums, Kearney is not afraid to step outside of her usual space and try something new. Right now that is watercolor, which she’s only done for about a year and a half.

“It’s a very new medium for me.

One that’s brand new and I’m still playing around with it,” said Kearney. “But I sold my first watercolor recently, so that felt full circle.”

Slightly playing on her own personal history with clay and sculpture, she’s also interested in learning wheel throwing so that she can explore ceramics. Glass blowing is another possible avenue that interests her, because she’s worked with glass but never in that capacity since it requires specific equipment that you wouldn’t necessarily have in a home studio.

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Some of Beth Kearney's cityscapes, highlighting the way she works with texture and light and reclaimed materials such as wood and plexiglass to give further character to subject.

"I'm always trying new ideas," she said. "I think we should always be open to anything new."

She'd also like to collaborate with other artists. Kearney particularly enjoys working in different ways with fellow CAA members and friends Mandi Bevando and Aneta Pierog-Sudol.

"I have gotten a lot out of that [in the past]," said Kearney. "[It would be great] to share our resources or see what we can bring from our different backgrounds and make something together, or share our experiences to teach other new skills."

In terms of what residents can do on a daily basis, whether or not they're involved in the arts, Kearney encouraged everyone to be open to supporting our schools and community. Art, she said, is everywhere. It's about showing up and valuing the importance of slowing down to see what is around you.

"We have murals under some of the bridges. There are flowers planted by the Garden Club in Clifton. Trees are planted, too. These little things are art," said Kearney. "It's about stopping, taking a breath, and acknowledging what is there. Whether it's a bird chirping or the sun is rising."

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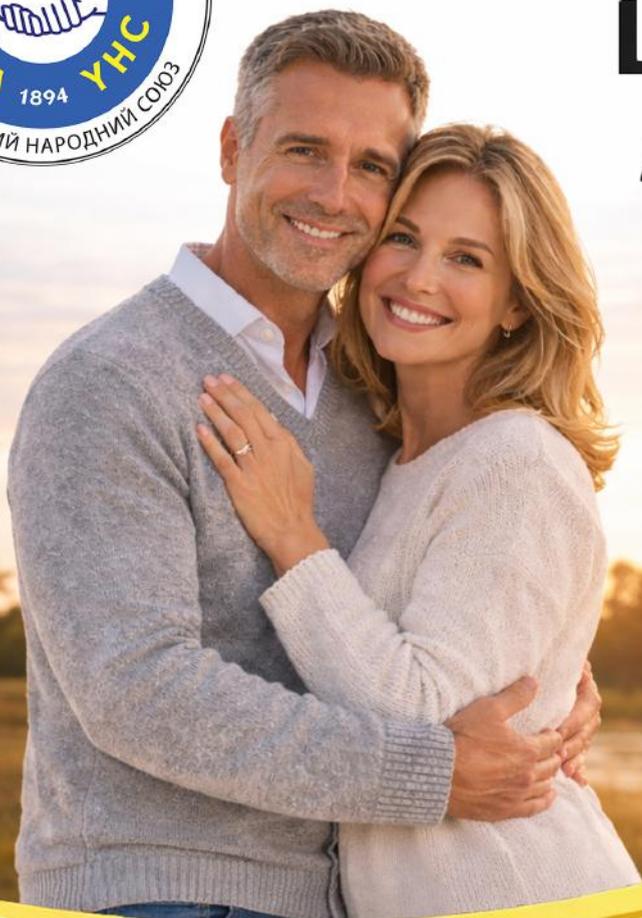
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Sketching & Ceramics @ CHS

By Robbie Niessen

Some artists start with a blank page. Sophia Zeisel started with cartoons.

Long before charcoal pencils and portraits, Zeisel's first artistic inspiration sprouted from the colorful characters that she watched on television as a toddler. Shows like Peppa Pig and Ni Hao Kai-Lan didn't just entertain her; they sparked her imagination.

"I was so captivated by the characters I would see on screen that I began to try drawing them myself on any piece of paper I could get my hands on," said Zeisel, 17.

What began as simple doodles evolved into a creative passion that continues to develop today. Now a junior at CHS, the Maple Valley resident works across several forms of art that include comics, mixed-media dioramas, and animation.

One form remains the heart of everything that she creates. "My favorite art form has always been drawing," she said, adding that she often thinks of it as "making illustrations," since the two ideas feel interchangeable. Drawing, she explained, is the place where her creativity feels most natural and where "you can turn ideas in your head into something you can actually see."

As she grew, Zeisel continued to learn and experiment. "I began watching a bunch of YouTube tutorials that helped introduce me to the world of illustration," said Zeisel.

Those tutorials helped her develop new skills while still staying connected to what inspired her from the beginning.

"As I grew up, I wanted to remain true to my roots," she said, adding that illustration has always felt like her "main form of expression. The majority of my pieces have been made with charcoal and graphite pencils since I'm most familiar with those mediums."

Her drawings often focus on still life and portraits, where careful shading and detail bring objects and faces to life. She doesn't limit herself to one format. Zeisel enjoys creating small comics and paper dioramas; projects that allow her to tell stories in different ways.



Mustang artists Sophia Zeisel and Brian Coleman.

Recently, Zeisel has "been getting into animation too." Learning digital art software is her next step, and she hopes that once she becomes more comfortable with it, she will begin creating digital illustrations and even short animated films.

For now, Zeisel describes art as a hobby, but one that she "would love to pursue as a serious career." Whether she is sketching with graphite, experimenting with mixed media, or learning animation tools, Zeisel continues to build her creative world one drawing at a time.

Exactly the way that it started years ago: with curiosity, imagination, and a pencil.

Creativity can begin with something as simple as a block of clay. For CHS sophomore Brian Coleman, what started as a quick moment of curiosity quickly turned into a hobby that he genuinely enjoys.

The Allwood resident remembers the exact moment that the idea first sparked.

"I saw a video about somebody making things out of clay and I thought it was really cool," said Coleman, 15. That small moment of inspiration was enough for him to sign up for Ceramics — and once he started, he realized he had found something special.

For Coleman, doing ceramics feels a little like magic.

A plain, shapeless lump of clay sits on the table, but it slowly transforms into something entirely new with patience and imagination. In his hands, clay becomes a canvas that doesn't require paint; only creativity.

"Ceramics is really fun, because you can create almost anything you imagine," he said.

Each project begins the same way, but no two pieces ever turn out alike. Like snowflakes made of earth instead of ice, every creation has its own personality. One of his favorite projects so far is a Mario-themed mug that he created in class.

What began as a simple cup turned into something much more playful.

"It was fun turning something normal into something from a video game," said Coleman.

Projects like that are what make ceramics exciting for him: taking an everyday object and giving it a creative twist.

When he's not working at a table covered in clay, he's marching across the field in formation for the Mustang Marching Band and trading the spinning rhythm of the pottery wheel for drum beats. Both activities are about timing and balance.

Just like every step in Marching Band has to land perfectly with the music, every movement in ceramics matters when shaping clay. Coleman plans to continue working with ceramics, even after high school.

"I think ceramics is a great hobby, and it's easy to keep doing," he said.

He hopes to create more detailed sculptures, especially animals. As he completes each project, Coleman adds another chapter to his growing story as a creator.

After all, a simple lump of clay can become almost anything, and Coleman is just getting started shaping what comes next.



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Around 2000, not long after the Clifton Arts Center was founded, it assumed responsibility for the Sculpture Park. The initial concept was for artists to loan work for two years, but some of these pieces have remained for over 20 years due to their expense and installation efforts.

That is to the benefit of residents who, from dawn until dusk, can admire over 30 sculptures that span the Municipal Complex. And the late Jerry Raphael made that possible, back when it was called the Sculpture Garden. The Beautification Committee championed sharing art, but it was Raphael's connections with artists that brought pieces to our city.

Michael Bertelli, pictured, is one of the artists who connected with Raphael. Bertelli donated his sculptures to CHS and Jubilee Park. He's also on the Sculpture Park Committee, ensuring the statues remain cared for by his own hand.





Among the 32 sculptures on the city hall campus, from facing page: Bust of Hercules, by Mike Bertelli; Chrysalis by Gerald Lynch; Spartacus bust and an Egyptian relief plate by Ruben Kadish; Masi-Watutu by Leon Wilburn. Above left: Resettlement by Judith Peck; One City, One Nation by Miklos Sebek; Unnamed by Miles Van Rensselaer; Scorpion by Matthew Johnson.

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Front from left: Amir Gomez, Will Thompson, Trevor Rascher, Justin Rascher, Steven Pena, Tony Morales. Standing: Josh Durante, Neil Harvey, Bobby Cross, Robert Pimental, Josangel Cruz, Jaycob Irizarry, Jayden Batista, (missing Aaron Tapia De La Cruz).

Joe Rivera has left several of Clifton’s preseason baseball scrimmages a bit frustrated, but it isn’t because he believes his team is bad. Rather, the veteran head coach believes his Mustangs have great potential, which is why some mediocre outings left him a bit exasperated.

The Mustangs went 6-17 last season, but appear poised for a bounce-back year thanks to a strong pitching rotation and athleticism in the field. “This year, we will be a lot better,” said Rivera. “We will be in every game.”

Pace-bound senior right-hander Trevor Rascher will be the Mustangs’ ace—a year after earning second-team All-Passaic and first-team all-league honors. Already a consistent mid-80s hurler, he’s got a strong arsenal of pitches.

“He is going to be very effective,” Rivera said. “We have to score runs and play defense behind him, but he’s a college pitcher. Everything you ask for, he has and throws them for strikes—fastball, slider and a great changeup.”

Another first-team all-league selection, senior righty Tony Morales will be Clifton’s No. 2 starter while also playing across the outfield. An adept base-stealer, he’ll play at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, N.Y., after graduation.

Junior right-hander Robert Cross will pitch third and is primed for a big year after transferring from St. Mary. A contact hitter who can work the count, he will bat near the top of the order.

Seniors Justin Cabrera and Aaron Tapia De La Cruz and junior Josangel Cruz make up the bullpen. The 6-foot-4 Cabrera—who will also play at Jefferson—will start at first base, while Cross mans second. Rascher will start at shortstop when not on the mound, with De La Cruz—who posted a team-best .375 average last spring—playing third.

Junior Amir Gomez will step in at various spots in the infield when normal starters are on the hill. Junior catcher Robert Pimental has a strong arm and a powerful bat.

The specific composition of the starting outfield remains unsettled, though it will consist of some combination of Morales, Cruz, and seniors Steven Pena and Jacob Irizarry. Pena is a capable offensive player who will bat near the middle of the order; Irizarry is speedy on the base paths and can also fill in the infield when needed.

Speed figures to be one of Clifton’s calling cards this season. With Irizarry and Morales capable of creating havoc on the bases and several others who can run, Rivera believes his team has the tools to manufacture runs and keep opponents on their heels—a crucial weapon for a club looking to make some noise in the counties and states.

“I think we will steal a lot of bases this year,” Rivera said. “We have a lot of speed. My expectation is to make the states and make a run in the counties. We have good pitching and we’ve got some solid baserunners. We’ve got to get some timely hits.”

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Standing from left: Isabella Figueroa, Andrea Cedeno, Stephanie Flete, Casey Mullen, Vanessa Aviles, Olivia Jovicic, Kylee Ocasio, Arianna Rodriguez. Kneeling: Brianna Armstrong, Natasha Aviles, Josephine Zagorski, Jordan Kulesa, Sydney Reeb.

There was a time when Clifton softball was nothing short of a powerhouse. From the late 1990s through the late 2000s, the program was a consistent contender in both North I, Group IV and Passaic County.

While it may take some time to again reach that status, the Mustangs are trending in the right direction under second-year head coach Nicole Mooney. If her energy is any indicator of the mood within the program, Clifton may be on the verge of its best season in recent memory and first with a winning record since 2022.

“I really hope to see us come out of here with a league title,” Mooney said, making no bones about her expectations. The mere fact that Mooney can contemplate such an achievement speaks volumes.

Part of her optimism is driven by the impressive pre-season of freshman pitcher Kylee Ocasio. A right-handed hurler who bats left, she brings impressive speed and spin and has performed well in scrimmages. Senior Sydney Reeb will also see time in the circle.

Josie Zagorski will start behind the plate for the fourth year; she’s the complete package. The TCNJ commit is one hit away from 100 for her career and is skilled at picking off opposing baserunners. The soon-to-be class valedictorian brings swagger and leadership to the field.

Junior Brianna Armstrong returns to first base after missing the entire 2025 season due to injury. Junior Andrea

Cedeno is the likely starter at second, though freshman Olivia Jovicic should see time there as well.

Sophomore Casey Mullen — a natural athlete who plays basketball in the winter and serves as the Mustangs’ quarterback in flag football — will play shortstop, with junior Natasha Aviles at third.

Sophomore Arianna Rodriguez and senior Isabella Figueroa are reliable reserve infielders.

Mooney is confident in her outfield trio of senior left fielder Jordan Kulesa, senior center fielder Stephanie Flete and freshman right fielder Vanessa Aviles.

“They are a true outfield,” Mooney said. “I am not just throwing my No. 9 batter in right field to fill a gap. Jordan played right last year and is really good at reading the ball. Stephanie is insanely fast. Vanessa has impressed me with her bat.”

Beyond the field, Mooney has her sights set on something larger — building a pipeline that ensures Clifton softball remains competitive for years to come. She has been actively reaching out to the town’s recreational program, looking to forge connections with younger players and their families before they ever set foot in a high school uniform.

“I am really trying to focus on keeping kids in Clifton,” Mooney said. “I have been communicating with the rec program. Making a relationship with younger kids will be big for us.”

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Seniors from left: Stephanie Flete, Gia Delgado, Ayanna Payano, Zaina Aburomi, Malaak Awawda, Christina Briguglio, Gianna Colon.



FLAG FOOTBALL

In three years at the helm of Clifton flag football, Lindsey Cinque has carved out a space as one of the most respected coaches in the area. She's fiery. She's knowledgeable. She's committed.

She has also delivered results, going 12-6-1 over the past two seasons and taking the Mustangs from being simply a "team" to being a "program." Still, the fourth-year head coach has some unfinished business, as the last two years have not ended with the championship she believes Clifton can achieve. This year, she has a mix of veteran leadership and youthful energy that can contend for championships.

"We all work really hard and give so much of ourselves to make this program great," Cinque said. "I have high expectations for our team in every regard. I expect a lot from them because I believe in them. I want everyone to see how great they are."

On offense, sophomore quarterback Casey Mullen returns looking to build on a strong 2025 campaign. Mullen has spent considerable time throwing this offseason with assistant coach Nick Giordano and should make big strides in her second year behind center.

"You can definitely see her improvement, and she looked good at the Wayne Valley Jamboree," Cinque said. "She looks good running. She's got some speed. I am definitely expecting big things out of her this year."

Mullen has a talented receiver group at her disposal. Junior Xiomara Mantilla, a Passaic Valley transfer, is new to the lineup but has 5-on-5 club experience and has impressed Cinque with her positive attitude. Speedy senior Stephanie Flete is back, having cut her teeth last year following an injury to Nyah Negron.

Sophomore Abby Rascher also stepped in for an injured teammate, Meagan Valido, last year and returns a more confident player who excels at finding gaps in opposing secondaries. She will play alongside classmate Julia Zyburra, with freshman Sophia Fischer also seeing time.

The multi-faceted Mustangs always make good use of their ground game under Cinque, and senior Christina Briguglio will be the team's lead back.

"We'll run a lot of misdirection, as well as short passes," Cinque said. "Christina is shifty, she has speed, she reads her blocks well." Sophomore Leila Hatcher is at center.

Clifton will have a strong veteran presence at linebacker, with Zyburra, Briguglio, Flete and Rascher starting from left to right. "They play fast and they fly to the ball," Cinque said. "They are very disciplined and understand their assignments. They understand how to read the offense, and they play hard."

Senior Ayanna Payano will be the left corner in Clifton's Cover 3 defense; sophomore Valerie Vasquez lines up on the right and sophomore Scarlette Vasquez starts at safety.

More than just a coach drawing up plays and filling out a depth chart, Cinque views her role in these players' lives through a much wider lens. The relationships she builds, the standards she sets and the belief she instills in her players are, to her, every bit as important as wins and losses — and it's a philosophy rooted as much in who she is off the field as on it.

"I say all the time, 'I run my program the way I run my family,'" Cinque said. "I am super strict with my three kids but love harder than anyone. I feel the same about my players. I know how good they can be."

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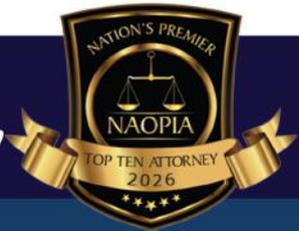
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Varsity track members on both pages. Above, back row from left: Zoe Eickhoff, Kim Moreno-Sainz, Hillary Batista, Genesis Tejada, Nicole Florian, Alexis Smith. Front: Rosana Bogeve, Jeimmy Picado, Ruth Lara, Miracle Robins.

The post-pandemic era did not do Clifton track and field any favors. The Mustangs have turned a corner, however, with participation numbers up and the boys and girls primed to contend in Passaic County this spring.

Boys head coach John Pontes likes what he sees on his roster, which had 78 athletes in the preseason. Senior Joel Vera will lead the way, lining up in the 110m high hurdles, 400m intermediate hurdles, long jump and triple jump. Vera is the Mustangs' most versatile competitor and will likely be one of its top point-scorers.

"Joel is a hard worker and a good role model for the younger athletes," Pontes said. "They see his success and the faith we have in him. He is a good person to model themselves after."

Pontes lauds senior Isaiah Velez for his work ethic and says he is one of the better hurdlers he has coached at a more modest height. Velez will run the 110m high hurdles and 400m intermediate hurdles and take on the long jump.

Senior Volodymyr Kozliuk has already carved out his spot as one of the program's all-time great jumpers, holding school records in the high jump and triple jump. A two-time sectional indoor champ who has also placed twice at the state Meet of Champions in the high jump, he will expand his duties to the 100m sprint and 4x100m relay.

"The reason we added the sprints was to get more speed into his jump, which will translate into a couple more inches," Pontes said. "If that works, he is a contender in the sectional and group meets." Senior Tarik Pesocan will take on the 400m sprint and javelin, while senior Anthony Pichardo hits the track in the 800m and 1600m runs. Junior Leo Spoon is a name to watch in the 3200m and 1600m runs.

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TRACK

Top from left: Anthony Pichardo, Kaiden Sasso, Bayron Espillat, David Feliciano, Luis Beristain, Christian Cabanilla, Edward Cardoso. Middle from blue hoodie: Dominic Yang, Liam Olivares, Kyler Jones, Aiden Hussey, Santino Esposito. Kneeling: Volodymyr Kozliuk, Adrian Wilson-King, Maximos Chrisafinas, Thomas Bauman, Manan Intwala, Tapan Mistry, Kyle Ramirez.

On the girls side, new coach Isabella Rivera is excited to take over a talented roster that features the likes of senior sprinter and jumper Mikaela Francisco, who heads into her final year looking to cap her high school career with championships. She will run the 100m sprint and long jump, and is poised to set new PRs and make her mark in the postseason. Francisco participated in the adidas Track Nationals in Virginia in March.

Junior Melissa Garth is another returnee among the Mustangs' accomplished sprinter group, running the 400m, 200m and 100m. Senior Rosana Bogevo will join her in all three events. Sophomore Jenna Eickhoff has been a consistent top-five finisher among the Mustangs and looks poised for a breakout season. Senior Alexis Smith, meanwhile, is

a proven 800m and 1600m distance runner who has taken on a major leadership role within the program.

Junior Cedra Alshujaieh is a shot put and discus thrower with consistently improving numbers.

Rivera said the blend of experienced upperclassmen and hungry underclassmen gives her confidence heading into her first season at the helm. With Francisco providing a blueprint for excellence and younger athletes like Eickhoff and Alshujaieh continuing to develop, the girls program looks well-positioned to compete for hardware when the postseason arrives.

"Taking over the girls program has been great," said Rivera, a Cedar Grove native. "The kids are committed and coachable. They take what you say and run with it."

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LACROSSE

Top from left: Isaiah Carranza, Sean Hansen, Caden Behan, Massimo Colucci, Ben Smith, Marek Dlugopolski, Adrian Rzadkowski. Middle: Andrew Nahui, Jack Niedzialek, Anthony Moller, Takeshi Kin. Kneeling: Phillip Hlawacz, Blake Cruz, Jacob Pirchala, Ryan Hamilton, Daniel Toplak Luis Zuniga, Matthew Zagorski, Ryan Murdoch, Nate Smith, Nayan Zalawadia.

The last three seasons have been difficult for Clifton boys lacrosse. After going 7-10 in 2022, the Mustangs have won just five of their past 56 games, routinely get-

ting defeated by large margins. This year, head coach Mike Velez will deploy a senior-heavy squad and, hopefully, make some noticeable improvement in his fourth season.

To do so, they will need a big year from senior mid-fielder Marek Dlugopolski, who led the team in points (31), goals (23) and ground balls (119) last year.

“Marek is by far the biggest and most athletic kid we have on the team,” Velez said. “I think that is what gets him to the level he was at last year. He is still progressing. His leadership has improved and he’s played all offseason.”

Sophomores Ryan Murdoch and Blake Cruz will join Dlugopolski in the midfield, giving the Mustangs a talented young core to build around. Sophomore FOGO Jack Niedzialek will be a reserve midfielder as well.

Senior Benjamin Smith will be Clifton’s top attackman after posting 16 goals and 26 points a year ago, both second on the team. Seniors Massimo Colucci and Caden Behan round out the position group.

Senior Luis Zuniga will lead the defense. The Mustangs’ second-most experienced player, he will play for King’s College (Pa.) next year. The back line will miss senior Roberto Ammiano, a talented player who is out for the season with a torn Achilles tendon. Sophomore Matthew Zagorski — a dedicated club player — and senior Daniel Toplak will look to step up in his absence. Sophomore Jacob Pirchala will tend goal for Clifton this spring.

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Kneeling from left: Samantha Huaylla, Violet Hernandez, Ella Carlo, Melanie Garth, Juime Santana, Marly Agayby, Allison Mendez, Jhazleen Pena, Kathy Marine. Standing: Jahayra Apreza, Quetzaly Montes, Adriana Morales, Mariajose Ramos, Ana DeOliveira, Aimee Fileccia, Zoe Martinez, Tiana Hrubovcakova, Taina LaBril, Keyla Fuquene, Mariana DeLaCruz, Oliva Weglinsk.

Amanda Gryszkin’s team has dealt with several unfortunate injuries this preseason. None appear season-ending, though, and if the Mustangs can weather being a bit undermanned early on, an improvement from last year’s 3-13 record seems likely.

“We won a scrimmage against Saddle Brook. We did a lot of good things against Paramus Catholic. The girls are focused. It’s going to be a group effort,” said Gryszkin, now in her 18th year as Mustangs’ girls lacrosse coach.

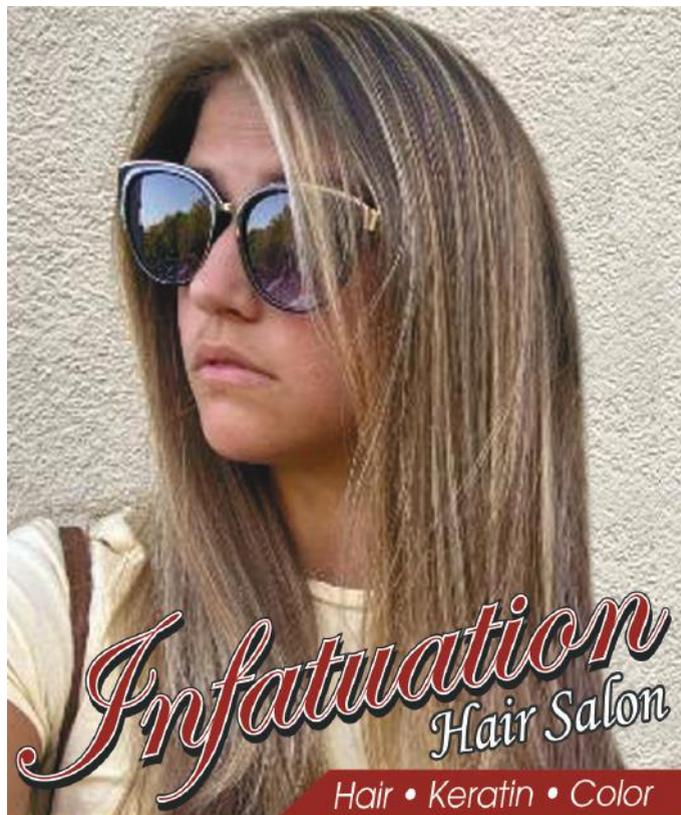
There is talent in the midfield, beginning with senior Jahayra Herrera Apreza. A detail-oriented and steady presence, she is adept on both sides of the field and has good speed. She will play alongside junior Zoe Martinez, the team’s top returning point-getter (24 last year) and goalscorer (21). Junior Tiana Hrubovcakova rounds out the position group, having scored nine goals as a sophomore.

Assistant Lou Lotito — fresh off a playoff season as Clifton’s head girls basketball coach — has worked closely with the defense, and has the group of senior Juime Santana, junior Kathy Martinez, and sophomores Melanie Garth and M.J. Ramos confident for a successful year.

They will play in front of senior Marly Agayby, a fourth-year goalkeeper who will start for the first time.

Clifton will sport an all-senior attack group, including starters Ella Carlo, Olivia Weglinski, Violet Hernandez and Quetzaly Montes, and reserves Mariana De La Cruz and Anna De Oliveira.

That group, along with several other Mustangs, has kept sharp through the offseason by competing in winter league lacrosse — and the early returns suggest it has paid off.



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Standing from left: Sterling Kimble, Shriji Kunadia, Tanay Mehta, Joseph Rojas, Ian Raghunandan, Justin Texcucano, Dawood Sajjad, Neel Sharma. Kneeling: Kaden Roman, Ashish Jariwala, Jacob Kotowski, Abd Rabee, Hamza Alhomouz. Missing Youseff Raslan.

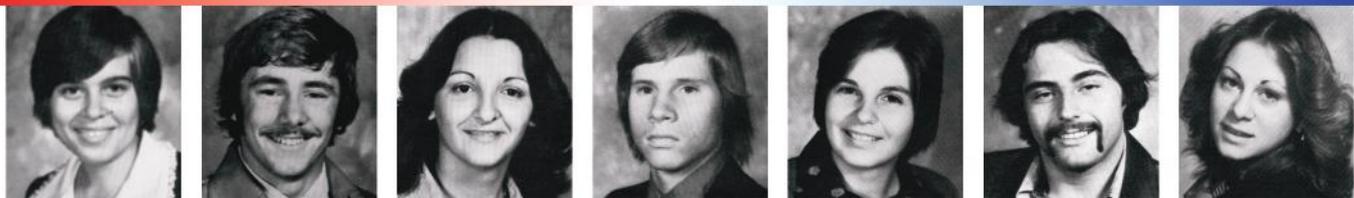
The Clifton boys tennis team went 6-10 last spring and is young going into this one. But if you think head coach Nick Giordano is resigned to an unsuccessful 2026, you're dead wrong. The second-year head coach is excited about where his program is headed, thanks in large part to a crop of freshmen with the potential to be great.

"They show up to compete," Giordano said. "They work. They're committed. I want to see us with an above .500 record. We can definitely make gains from 2025."

Shriji Kunadia will be the Mustangs' top player and is one of three ninth-graders in the singles lineup. Giordano calls him a "pure tennis player" and lauds his strong backhand, forehand and serve. He believes Kunadia has the po-

tential to be a future county champion. Fellow freshman Jacob Kotowski brings experience as a varsity soccer player to the court. A high-level athlete with imposing strength, he possesses a powerful forehand. Tanay Mehta will play third singles and has an impressive all-around game.

The Mustangs' doubles squads are still coming together but figure to be senior-dominated with Dawood Sajjad, Justin Texcucano, Ian Raghunandan and Ashish Jariwala. With a blend of seasoned seniors steadying the doubles lineup and a freshman class that Giordano clearly believes in, Clifton has reason for optimism. If the young Mustangs develop quickly — and their coach's enthusiasm suggests they will — a turnaround season is well within reach.



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Standing from left: Coach Steven Alvarado, Marko Rivas, Kevin Benjumea, Mo'tasem Othman, Jason Molina, Adam Fahmi, Jonathan Solis, Fozil Khaidarov, Matthew Linares, Flavio Cisneros, Coach Jorge Rodriguez. Kneeling: Aaron Nunez, Angel Lorenzo, Jeremy Bravo, Sviatoslav Voroshchuk, Huseyin Mintas, Parth Mistry.

It has been an up-and-down two years for Clifton boys volleyball. A season after going 21-7 and reaching a sectional semifinal, the Mustangs finished a disappointing 5-18 in 2025.

This year, with some skilled hitting and fresh faces on the roster, Clifton will look to reverse the trend and qualify for the state playoffs once again.

“One day at a time,” head coach Jorge Rodriguez said. “We just need to get better one day at a time, whether it’s in practice or a game or on a day off watching film.”

Senior Flavio Cisneros returns at outside hitter looking to exceed a penultimate high school campaign in which he led the Mustangs in kills with 70. Cisneros also posted team highs in service points (80) and aces (25). Clifton will need him to be at his best in the early part of the year as younger members of the roster gain experience.

“Last year, Flavio was setting and hitting from the right side,” noted Rodriguez. “This year, he is going to have really good numbers and I think he is going to have a lot of aces. He will be a big help in the serve-receive, passing, defense and blocking.”

Adam Fahmi, another senior outside hitter, has had a strong preseason and Rodriguez expects him to have a big

year. An explosive jumper who is tall and can swing it, he has the tools to be a breakout star this spring.

Setter Matthew Linares, a senior, had 200 assists last season and will be counted on to exceed those numbers — something the Mustangs will need for their offense to run.

Junior Kevin Benjumea and sophomore Fozildhan Khaidarov are both natural outside hitters, but Rodriguez needs support at the net and believes both can be valuable presences on defense.

Senior Marko Rivas is new to the game but has the athleticism to be a valuable contributor there as well.

Junior Mo'tasem Othman will start on the right side. Two other juniors, Angelo Lorenzo and Jeremy Bravo, will be a serving specialist and libero, respectively.

With a deeper and more versatile roster than a year ago, Rodriguez feels cautiously optimistic heading into the season. The experienced seniors figure to set the tone early while the younger players find their footing — and if the pieces fall into place, Clifton has the talent to be a postseason contender once again.

“We have some good pieces all around,” Rodriguez said. “Hopefully, if somebody needs support or a rest, we have subs that we can put in that will play at a high level.”

MARCH SPORTS RECAP

By Tom Szieber



Coaches Dan Geleta and Moe Farhan with Jarret Rodriguez. Lillianne Addabbo, Kathalyn Tavarez and Nadine Millet.

Boys and girls wrestling made its presence felt in post-season tournaments with the girls generating particular excitement. Three Mustang girls qualified for the NJSIAA state individual tournament, a milestone that speaks to the program's rapid growth.

Freshman Nadine Millet capped a remarkable debut season at 31-7, finishing in the top 12 in New Jersey at 152 pounds. She dropped her opening match in Atlantic City but battled back for a victory before being eliminated.

Junior Kathalyn Tavarez followed a similar path, going 1-2 at states and also landing in the top 12, at 165 pounds, to close out a 20-14 campaign. Lillianne Addabbo rounded out the trio, wrapping up a stellar sophomore year with a 37-10 record and 28 pins. All three had placed fourth at the Region I tournament at Vernon Township High School.

Other Mustangs of note: Senior Valeria Veliz (132 pounds, 18-13) picked up two wins at regions in her first season on the mat. Senior Ruth Lara (120 pounds, 19-11), sophomores Jade Mayo (24-15), and Nicole Romero (12-12) each earned berths in regional competition.

It was the kind of season that can set a program on a path to sustained success. "I hope we have even more girls participating next year," head coach Zuzana Geleta said. "Now the girls are a little more experienced and understand what it takes. They know it's not only showing up to the wrestling room...it's working out, getting strong, and having mental toughness."

Mustang boys finished 9-15 but showed steady improvement as the season wore on. Joe Dumeng and Jarrett Rodriguez both advanced to Region 2 competition at Mt. Olive.

Rodriguez reached the quarterfinals with a 4-0 win over Christian Bastante of West Essex before falling to top-seeded Matthew Mulligan of Bergen Catholic, 14-4, in the semis — a match that was a one-point affair heading into the third period. He wrestled back for a podium spot, beating Bastante again, 7-1, in the third-place match.

At states, Rodriguez opened with a loss to St. John Vianney senior Matt Gould. In the wrestleback rounds, Rodriguez topped North Hunterdon's Reid Buzby, 11-1, then edged St. Joseph (Metuchen) junior Nico DeRado, 7-3, before his tournament run ended against Camden Catholic senior Lazarus Joyce via technical fall in the third period.

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Mustangs of the Month



Aylin Castro, Denzel I. Aguila, Kaitlynn Garas, George Humpiri Huancollo.

Here are the **Mustangs of the Month** for April 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.

Aylin Castro – Freshman

Trying to pace herself and manage her time so that she can do all of her schoolwork efficiently is what Aylin Castro has worked to perfect since she and her classmates joined the ranks of Mustangs up at the high school at the end of last year.

Although she is not yet involved with CHS extracurriculars, she does have a plan for the future. Along with plans to attend college, she hopes to “become a nurse and be financially stable.” It means keeping a positive outlook, even when things are challenging.

“I usually try to think about the wins and the good things that come with getting through or finishing whatever tough situation I’m going through,” said Castro (CHS 2029).

Castro enjoys History class and learning about how civilization has gotten to where we are in the present day. Her most influential teacher is her English teacher, Mr. David Radler.

“He supports me a lot in my work and helps me in general when I’m confused,” said Castro.

Castro is also appreciative of everything that her mother does for her, now and throughout her childhood.

“She always teaches me how to navigate daily challenges, and she believes in what I’m capable of doing.”

Denzel I. Aguila – Sophomore

College may feel like one small step for some students, but Denzel I. Aguila knows it’s the first step toward his aspiration of earning an art degree.

His interests are diverse, starting with his appreciation for Neil Armstrong. Aguila admires the late American astronaut and aeronautical engineer’s role as becoming the first person to walk on the moon in 1969. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Aguila’s favorite subject is Science.

“It has interested me since I was a kid,” said Aguila (CHS 2028). “The multitude of theories and explanations as to how the universe works, along with the incredible knowledge that we already have, is awe-inspiring to me.”

Aguila participates in Mustang Ambassadors, which is a club that is focused on supporting the Student Council and PBSIS program. One major hurdle that he has overcome at CHS is socializing with new people.

“I’ve been able to make new friends and connections, and I hope to keep doing so,” he said.

Aguila knows the importance of self-motivation, especially when things are challenging for him. But he also isn’t reluctant to accept guidance from teachers like English teacher Mr. Doug Mills.

“I stay motivated by reassuring myself that I’m able to get through tough times and putting focus on my work.”

Kaitlynn Garas – Junior

Inspiration is close to home for Kaitlynn Garas.

“My siblings and I have always been musical, my older sister Crystal Ann being one of my biggest inspirations and role models,” said Garas (CHS 2027). “She was also part of Band and Orchestra and was concertmaster for two years.”

Garas is the concertmaster and orchestra manager for CHS Orchestra, as well as a member of the Marching Band, Concert Band, Wind Ensemble, Jazz Band, and Brass Band. She plays in the Community Band and has competitively auditioned into and performed in the North Jersey Region Orchestra, North Jersey Region Band, and New Jersey All-State Orchestra.

That’s just part of her résumé. It was WWMS’ Orchestra Director Justin Louie who encouraged her to explore a possible career in Music Education.

“There is no better way for me to share my passion for music and performance than to teach others to love music the way that I do by passing on my knowledge, skills, and experience to others, just as Mr. Louie did to me,” said Garas.

She also credited former Orchestra Director Natalie Babiak, Orchestra Director Paulina Edel, and Band Director Bryan Stepneski.

“[They are all] such amazing teachers, who I have learned so much from,” said Garas.

George Humpiri Huancollo – Senior

There are many influential teachers that George Humpiri Huancollo has interacted with at CHS, so choosing one was a tall task for the senior.

“[ESL/Bilingual teacher Ms. Fotini Kotrotsios] would be the one,” said Huancollo (CHS 2026). “She was one of the first teachers I met here. She was like a second mother to me, always helping me. Even when I was struggling with learning the language, we had some sort of connection.”

“I haven’t had the chance to see her ... in almost two years so, if she hopefully reads this, I really appreciate you so much,” he continued. “Thank you for being in my life; words aren’t enough to express how important you are to me.”

Huancollo plans to attend college, but his main aspiration is being influential in someone else’s life. He wants others to see his work and feel inspired.

“Whether it’s through my art, an animated show, my music, or other creative projects,” he said. “I want to help brighten someone’s bad day and bring a little light into their life.”

His father and aunt inspire him most.

“In a world where things aren’t always successful, facing challenges and continuing forward is a trait I really admire about them,” he said.



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Salvation Army boosters from left front: Lola Carrol, Penelope Surgent, Chris Amaro, Christina Ramirez, Linda Surgent and Drea DeLuca. Second row: Bob Foster, Joe Siano, Debbie Oliver, Gregory Surgent, Dan Bush and Jim Anzaldi.

Doing the most good is the theme of The Salvation Army and this group pictured are doing their best to continue the good work in Clifton, Passaic and beyond.

These committee members are on a mission to raise awareness and funds. The Salvation Army is on the scene to help families when fires or floods strike, running a food pantry, offering utility and rent assistance, and guidance.

In 2025, nearly 5,000 local families received food supplies, 23,908 hot meals were served at the Passaic center and 519 kids received gifts for Christmas. And this past summer, 19 kids attended a summer sleep-away camp.

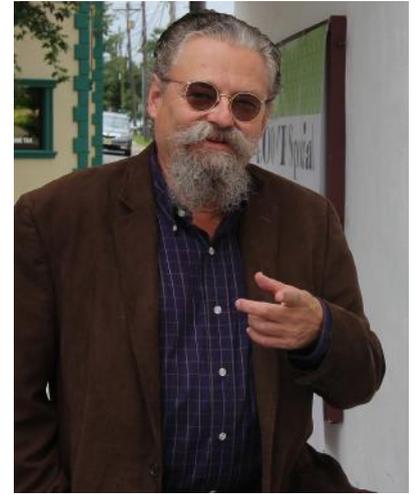
To continue those efforts, Co-Chairs Daniel Bush and Penelope Surgent are asking readers to send a check to The Salvation Army, 550 Main Ave., Passaic, NJ 07055. For more info, reach out to any of the committee members or write to christina.ramirez@use.salvationarmy.org.

The 27th CAST Film Festival presented by the Clifton Education Foundation is April 22 at 7 pm in the CHS Auditorium, 333 Colfax Ave. Short original films by Clifton students in CAST will be featured. Tickets are \$10.

The CEF's 3rd Annual Endless Summer reunion for retired Board of Education employees is Sept. 15 from noon to 4 pm at Shannon Rose. \$40 admission. 50/50 drawing. Details on Instagram @cliftoneducationfoundation or write Kim Puzzo at cefcommdirector@gmail.com.



New Jersey Symphony Music Director Xian Zhang (above) will celebrate America's 250th with a spirited string quartet performance of patriotic favorites on June 12 at 7 pm at the Clifton Arts Center. Tickets are \$30; \$25 for groups of five or more or \$10 for kids 12 and under. Refreshments to follow. To register, go to cliftonartscenter.org or call 973-472-5499. Cash or check accepted.



The cast of Kismet's CAC *Boeing Boeing*, from left: Ashley Alvarez as Gabriella: Shawn Dawiskiba as Bernard: Andrea White as Berthe: Alan Neibuhr as Robert: Molly Arts as Gretchen: Not pictured Sarah Selim as Gloria. And to celebrate National Poetry Month, the Bard of Dutch Hill, Jim Gwyn, and others, will read at the Main Clifton Library on April 23.

Boeing Boeing features French bachelor Bernard and three flight attendants, from three different countries who all believe they're engaged to Bernard! What could possibly go wrong? Presented as a joint fundraiser for the Clifton Arts Center and Kismet Performing Artists, the comedy is staged April 24-26 and May 1-3 at the Clifton Arts Center. Tickets: \$40. Purchase kismetperformingartiststheatre.wordpress.com.

The Bard of Dutch Hill Jim Gwyn will celebrate National Poetry Month with a reading on April 23, at 2 pm, at the Main Clifton Library. Also reading will be poets Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Fran Lombardi-Grahl, and Jacqueline Wooten-Rose. An open reading follows. Free.

Friends of the Clifton Public Library have a April 29, 6:30 pm meeting followed by "Masters of Song: Barbra Streisand and Marvin Hamlisch" presented by Clint Edwards, in the Main Library. A pianist, composer, and storyteller, Edwards offers a musical and visual performance exploring the lives and music of Streisand and Hamlisch. Questions? Call the Main Branch at 973-772-5500, Allwood Branch at 973-471-0555, or visit cliftonpl.org.

Clifton Health Department

2026 Spring Rabies Clinics for Dogs & Cats

Clifton Dates

Location: DPW Garage,
307 E. 7th St., Clifton, NJ 07011

Dogs & Cats: (Free)

Saturday, April 18th
2:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Wednesday, April 22nd
5:00 pm - 7:00 pm

*2026 Dog Licenses are available for
Clifton Residents Only*

Little Falls Date

Location: DPW: 70 Sindle Ave., Little Falls, NJ 07424

Wednesday, April 29th
for Dogs & Cats from 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm

2026 Dog & Cat licenses available for Little Falls Residents Only

- * CALL CLIFTON AT (973) 470-5760 FOR MORE INFORMATION.
- * CALL LITTLE FALLS AT (973) 256-0170 FOR MORE INFORMATION.
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- * NO ONE UNDER THE AGE OF 18 WILL BE ALLOWED IN WITHOUT AN ADULT.
 - * MUST HAVE VALID FORM OF IDENTIFICATION
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Following a vetting process, Eve Estrick-Barnes, at left, took the oath of office on March 17 as a Board of Education Commissioner to complete Lucy Danny's term. Danny tendered her resignation on Jan. 12 after serving 15 years on the BOE. Estrick-Barnes attended Clifton Schools, where her children now receive their education. She is the Director of Risk Management, Performance Improvement, & Compliance at Summit Oaks Hospital. Estrick-Barnes earned her bachelor's in Sociology with a concentration in Social Services and Master's in Applied Sociology at William Paterson. Her term will conclude Dec. 31, 2027. The three seats set to appear on the Nov. 3 ballot are currently held by Joseph Siano, Tanya Suarez, and Joseph Canova.

Clifton Garden Club meets April 14 at 6:30 pm at the Allwood Library, 44 Lyall Rd. Miranda Madrazo, City Green's Teen Community Garden Director, will explain vegetable gardening and provide planting and care tips. Questions? Call Karin Christiaens at 973-420-8212.

Friends of the Clifton Public Library present Jane Stuart and the Jane Stuart Trio performing, "A Tribute To Billie Holiday: The Songs and Stories of the Great Lady Day" on April 9, 7-8 pm, at Main Memorial, 292 Piaget Ave.

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

CHS Key Club Caring Food Pantry recognizes that families face many challenges, and the pantry is one way to alleviate some concerns. Students may access the pantry in S307 up to twice per month, while supplies last. To request a bag of food, or to contribute, write Ms. Jacqueline Turk: jturk@cliftonschoools.net.

CELA Brighton's Family Fun Day is June 13, 10 am at 290 Brighton Rd. Sponsored by the Clifton Early Learner Academy, Clifton Public Schools and Clifton Education Foundation, the day offers arts and crafts, entertainment, vendors and local businesses. Questions? Call 973-470-2066 or write Gina at gpollaro@cliftonschoools.net.

Jersey's Friday Night Comedy is now at the Athenia Veterans Post, 147 Huron Ave. Free and hosted by Jonathan Justin, show time is 8:30 pm every Friday. Cash bar and parking available. Questions or want updates? Subscribe to jonathanjustin.substack.com.



Center for Family Resources Head Start in Clifton is a federally funded early childhood program for eligible families. Kids receive education, health, nutrition, mental health, and family support services. Head Start helps build strong foundations that promote school readiness. For info: 973-472-8880 or Deannas@cffr.net or Nildah@cffr.net.

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Boy Scout Troop 21's Pancake Breakfast is April 12, 8 am to noon, in the St. Philip the Apostle School Auditorium, 797 Valley Rd. Last seating is at 11:30 am. Cost for adults is \$18, seniors \$15, and kids 12 and under \$10. Under 4 eat free with a paying adult. Tickets at the door. Questions about breakfast or joining Troop 21? Write troop21clifton@gmail.com.

Clifton Community Band's 23rd Annual Lollipops & Roses Concert is May 16 at 2 pm in the CHS Auditorium, 333 Colfax Ave. Under the baton of Bob Morgan, tickets are \$7 for adults and kids over 12. Free admission for veterans and active military who can expect a stirring rendition of our National Anthem. The concert helps support the Clifton Education Foundation. In 2002, Morgan founded the Community Band. The group of

musicians meets Tuesdays in the CHS Band Room, 333 Colfax Ave., from 7-9 pm. No fees or membership dues. No auditions are necessary. The group is open to senior citizens down to eighth graders. The Community Band runs from September through July and is sponsored by the Clifton Mustang Band Alumni Association and the Recreation Department. For info, visit mustangbandalumni.com/clifton-community-band.

At the 2025 Lollipops & Roses, retired and current Marching Mustang band directors Robert Morgan (who served 1973-2016) and the man with the baton now, Bryan Stepneski.



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CHS Cheer won its fourth consecutive New Jersey Cheer and Dance Coaches Association (NJCDCA) state championship. The victory followed their win at the Next Level Grand National Championship in Providence, RI on March 1.

The Red Hat Angels, a team walking in the Relay For Life of Clifton/Rutherford, host Mangia Day at Bruno's in the Clifton Plaza, on May 13. Mention Red Hats on dine in, take out and delivery orders between 11 am and 9 pm and Bruno's will donate a percentage to the cause. At Relay for Life, team members take walk or run on the Clifton Stadium track on June 6 to raise hope, funds and awareness on the services provided by the American Cancer Society. Details: cancer.org or at secure.acsevents.org.

St. Philip Primetimers have two bus trips to Resorts Casino in Atlantic City. Bus leaves St. Philip Drive at 9:30 am on May 26 and June 23. Purchase tickets in advance by calling Jean at 973-253-1619 and find out the details.

Power of One Christian Coaching and Outreach Ministries 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.

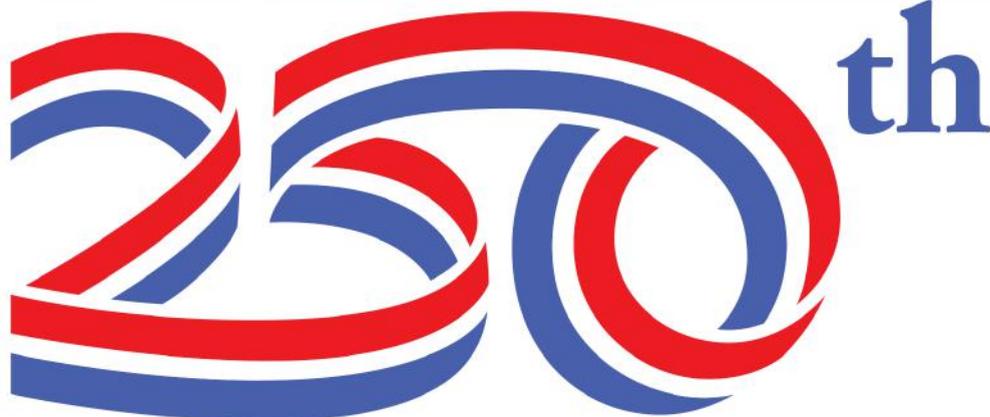


The Clifton Heroes Parade Fundraiser on April 25, 6-11 pm at Athenia Veterans Post, features dance music by Jersey Sound. The \$50 ticket include buffet, beer and soda with proceeds support the Memorial Day and November's Parades. Checks to: Clifton Heroes Parade Committee, c/o Clifton Recreation, 900 Clifton Ave., Clifton, NJ 07013. For credit card payments, call 973-470-5956. Questions? Call Kevin Gorman at 201-757-5956.

Homework help for first through fourth graders is at the Main Library until June 17. More info: 973-772-5500.

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Botany Police-Health Partnership Helps Build Neighborhood



In 2024 at the Botany Satellite office, the Opioid Response team, from left: Kevin Collucci, George Figueroa and Gary Giardina, Erika Shyroky, Tom Sadowski and Nate King. On facing page, Sgt. Rob Dowski, center, Sam Rodriguez and Lance Gardner.

The partnership between the Clifton Health Department (CHD) and the Clifton Police Department's Community Policing Division is unique. And over nearly four years since its inception, the downward trend of numbers illustrate how caring people in the community have helped build relationships and strengthen community.

For instance, a review of the number of incidents of social safety issues ranging from public drunkenness and disturbances to healthcare access and interdiction with substance abuse, is down significantly. For example, there were 752 quality of life complaint calls in 2022, prior to the satellite office opening.



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By 2025, that number had dropped to 135 calls annually. As illustrated, incidents decreased substantially after the first year of the satellite office’s operation. These calls required police response and included disorderly conduct, noise complaints, city ordinance violations, and homeless-related complaints.

“I was very happy to be extended the opportunity to come work with these guys,” Sergeant Robert Domski told Clifton Merchant in the November 2025 edition. “Not that I thought they wouldn’t be, but I was pleasantly surprised by just how involved these detectives are in the community. It’s something that I hope to continue moving forward.”

To contact the Community Policing Division with quality-of-life or non-emergency concerns, call 973-803-5716 or email communitypolicing@cliftonpolice.org.

This success is a direct result of CHD and the Community Policing Division being proactive and working collaboratively with the community to resolve issues before they escalate. These efforts have significantly reduced the impact on the Clifton Police Department, allowing officers to focus on other calls for service.

In addition, the CHD Health Education and Social Services Divisions have conducted numerous screenings, clinics, and educational sessions, providing mental health workshops, resources, and direct assistance to residents.

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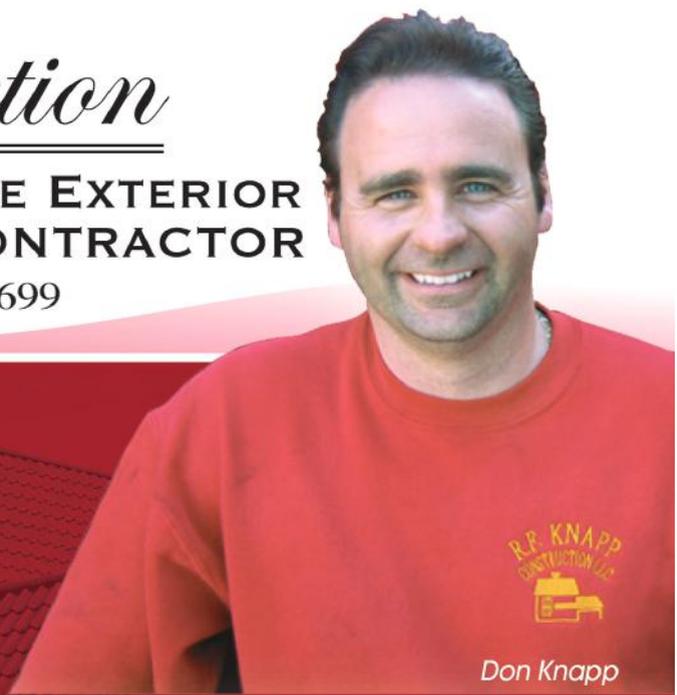
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April 2026 - Birthdays & Celebrations



No foolin'! **Ken Peterson** (CHS '08) and **Nicole Rosoline-Peterson** (PC '08) marked their Third Anniversary on April 1! **Bill** and **Mary Van Eck** celebrate their 51st Anniversary on April 12.



Alexis Vandenberghe celebrates on April 20th. **Mark Peterson** will be 73 on April 5. **Damian Robert Calvo** will be 20 on April 13.

Pete & Danielle Vandenberghe celebrate their 21st Anniversary on April 24th.

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|----------------------------|-----|
| Karen Goldey..... | 4/1 | Eric Homsany | 4/3 |
| Timothy Hayes..... | 4/1 | Kevin John Lord | 4/3 |
| Stephanie L. Magaster | 4/1 | Greg Alexander..... | 4/4 |
| Hetal Patel | 4/1 | Joey Scotto | 4/4 |
| Karen Schwartz..... | 4/1 | Bo Franko | 4/5 |
| Raymond DeDios..... | 4/3 | Sabrina Greco | 4/5 |
| Carl DiGisi..... | 4/3 | Wafa Othman | 4/5 |
| | | Bob Tanis | 4/5 |
| | | Sharon J. Koribanics | 4/6 |
| | | Carmela Meglio | 4/6 |
| | | Jessica Mondelli..... | 4/6 |
| | | Emma Rozewski | 4/6 |
| | | Luke Kulesa..... | 4/7 |
| | | Donna Mangone | 4/7 |
| | | George Sadiv..... | 4/7 |
| | | Patricia Colman..... | 4/8 |
| | | Sheryll Franko | 4/8 |
| | | Jackie Henderson | 4/8 |
| | | Jeff Murcko..... | 4/8 |
| | | Emma Gretina | 4/9 |
| | | Kathy Krisinski | 4/9 |



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Logan Smith.....	4/10
Brian Firstmeyer.....	4/11
Leila Gasior.....	4/11
Felipe Rivera.....	4/11
Erin Smith.....	4/11
Debbie Tucker.....	4/11
Josh Ontell.....	4/13
William Parks III.....	4/13
Alexander John Mosciszko.....	4/14
Lisa Kulesa.....	4/15
Adam Pienciak.....	4/15
Kurt Irizarry.....	4/16
Robert Monzo.....	4/16
Linda Humphrey.....	4/17
Joseph P. Koribanics.....	4/17
Maura Coleman.....	4/19
Jason Dubnoff.....	4/19
Jennifer O'Sullivan.....	4/19
Bryan Rodriguez.....	4/19
John Anderson.....	4/20
Jeff Camp.....	4/20
Greg Nysk.....	4/21
Alicia Rose Aste.....	4/22
Lori Hart.....	4/22
Alyssa Tucker.....	4/22
Bobby Ventimiglia.....	4/22
Danny Gorun.....	4/23
John Pogorelec, Jr.....	4/23
Marc Scancarella.....	4/23
Katie Michelotti.....	4/25
Brianna A. Pastore.....	4/25
Klondike Tresca.....	4/25
Buddy Czyzewski.....	4/26
Stephanie Magaster.....	4/26
Jillian Mangone.....	4/26
Annie Pogorelec.....	4/26
Elise Termyna.....	4/26
Mike Grimaldi.....	4/27
Michael Press.....	4/27
Peter Chudolij.....	4/28
April Graham.....	4/28
Stephen Camp, Jr.....	4/29
Paul Colman.....	4/29
Heather Halasz.....	4/29
Christine Klein.....	4/29

Send May dates & names...
tomhawrylkosr@gmail.com



Tom Hawrylko, Jr., is 39 on April 16. **Arielle Hawrylko** turned 37 on March 25 and her husband **Joe Hawrylko** turns 41 on April 27. **John and Donna Hawrylko's** 47th anniversary is April 28.

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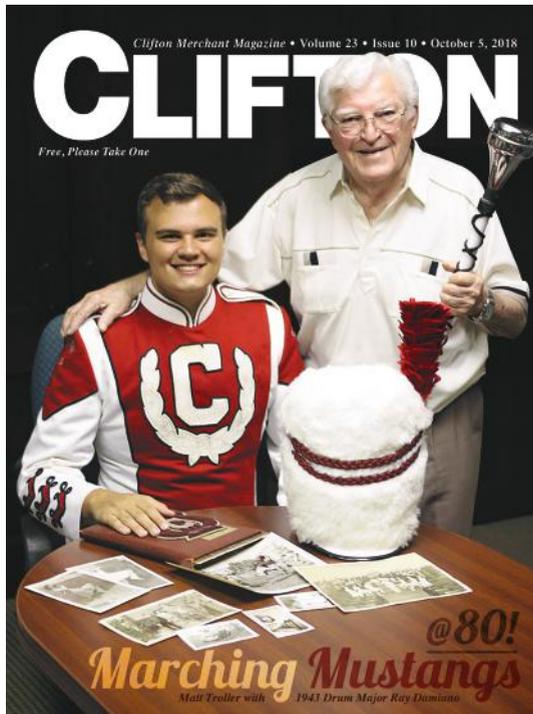


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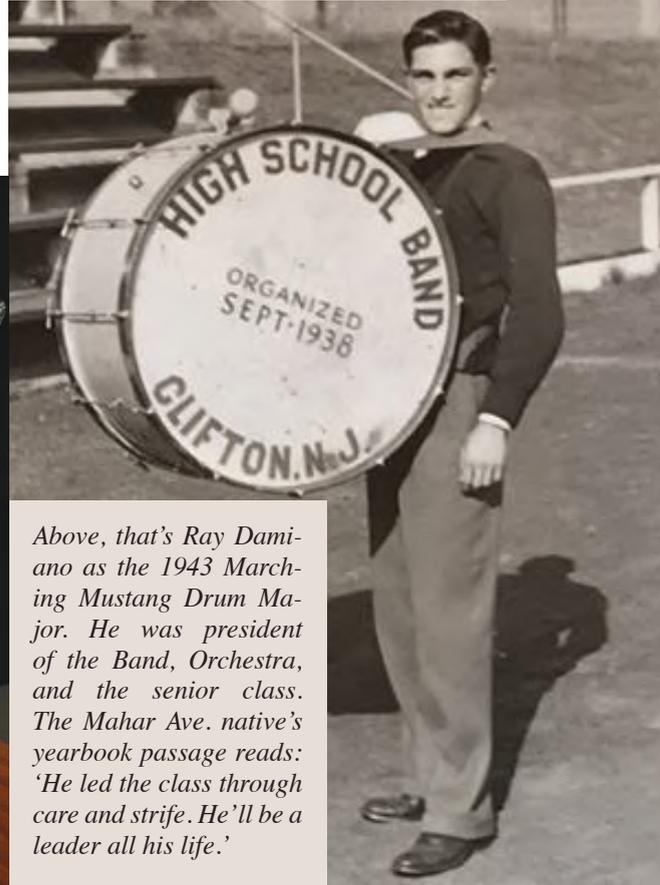
A Century of Salutations

from the 1944 Mustang Class President

Ray Damiano is turning 100 on Nov. 8 and wants to know if Mustangs from the Class of 1944 are still reading this magazine. Ray shared our cover with the 2018 Marching Mustang Drum Major Matt Troller in October of that year. From the fall of 1943 to generations after in 2018, the two Drum Majors shared stories of leading the storied band, decades apart. Damiano cites his time as a Marching Mustang as formative in his career and life in general. To contact Ray, drop a line to: Damiano Realty, 39 East Main St., Little Falls, NJ 07424.



I. RAYMOND DAMIANO 35 Mahar Ave
*He led the class through care and strife,
 He'll be a leader all his life.*
 President—Band; President—Orchestra; President—
 Senior Class.



Above, that's Ray Damiano as the 1943 Marching Mustang Drum Major. He was president of the Band, Orchestra, and the senior class. The Mahar Ave. native's yearbook passage reads: 'He led the class through care and strife. He'll be a leader all his life.'

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