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The Joy

...of galloping through Clifton!

Back in 1982 and 1983, Downtown Clifton (then called Main Mall) was still a bit of a shopping district. Carolina Jean Factory, Epstein's, Industrial Stationary, Clifton Speed Center, as well as banks, real estate offices, law firms, diners and others businesses, called the district home.

There was no Special Improvement District but the North Jersey Chamber of Commerce was the hub in the old New Jersey Bank building. Staffed by George Homcy and Russ Schneider, the team also included Barbara DiDonna and Bill Walters of Clifton Community Development.

Together with the Main Mall Business Association they hired me after the Dateline Clifton (which I started in 1981) and the Clifton Journal merged, and George Kroll became editor. The Main Mall paid me an hourly wage to collect merchant dues. Those funds were used to clean and promote the district with street fairs, car shows and an annual Christmas Parade. Working with Jimmy Anzaldi, Fran Coco and Paul Epstein, we came up with a grand idea.

Thanks to Ray Luchko, who knew a Vietnam Vet pilot, Santa landed in a chopper in Main Memorial—unbelievable, right? From there, Santa and the Marching Mustangs led the floats, dance groups, civic leaders and politicians.

Back then I often rode horses from a stable in Pompton Plains. I got the owners there to agree to bring a team of horses (and ranch hands who followed, as many will understand) to conclude our parade.



From the Editor, Tom Hawrylko, Sr.

Horseback on Main Ave. and waving an American flag was a twice-in-a-lifetime joy (I did it again in 1983). Once Santa got to Clifton Speed, I guided my Appaloosa for a tour of Dutch Hill, galloping through the streets, blowing the minds of neighbors. As I waited for the traffic light at Clifton and Third Ave., I was 10 feet in the air atop this steed. Really, I was on top of my world.

On the following pages, you'll read more joyful tales and memories from our neighbors. And please turn to page 98 to see my kids, our family's combined joy.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all!

Clifton Merchant Magazine

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JOY MUSTANG

By Ariana Puzzo

The future is bright, and so is the joyful legacy of the Mustang Marching Band. That's especially true for Band Director Bryan Stepneski, whether he's directing under stadium lights or watching his son high step through their kitchen.

But the two-year-old Mustang-in-the-making still has some time to practice.

"[Cameron] is obsessed with the band. It is the cutest thing," said Stepneski (CHS 2009). "Every day, at some point, he says, 'I want to see the band' and he marches around the kitchen."

It's safe to say that Cameron's a hit with the students when he attends rehearsals for the 87th edition of the Mustang Band. He can also name the different instruments and Stepneski has a good feeling that future musically-inclined Mustangs will be in good company.



Awaiting speeches after the Veterans Parade and their next-to-final performance of the season, this photo and those which follow are outtakes of the 2025 Marching Mustangs from Nov. 9.



“Talk about ‘Joy,’” said Stepneski, proudly. Interested in learning about Marching Band registration or finding their performance calendar? Visit cliftonmustangband.com and follow @chsmustangband on Facebook and Instagram.

From Mustang Musician to Maestro

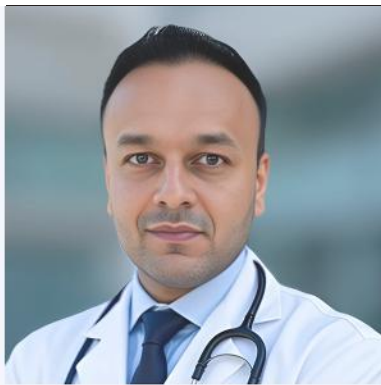
Now in his 10th year as the Marching Band’s director, Stepneski knows how to thread tradition with evolution and does it without missing a beat.

His talented and dedicated staff help make it possible, including Alyssa Stepneski, who is also his wife; John Rivas, Kasey Molner, and Robert Harsaghy. The Montclair Heights resident was no stranger to the Showband of the Northeast’s inner workings when he stepped back onto the field in this role.

In fact, retired Band Director Robert Morgan (CHS 1966) had plenty to say on Stepneski’s talent and positive attitude when he was a band kid under Morgan’s direction. The two men maintain a solid relationship with each other.

They see each other regularly with the Community Band, and Stepneski added that Morgan has an open invitation to attend the Marching Band’s rehearsals.

“I feel like ‘mentor’ is the right word [to describe our relationship], for sure,” said Stepneski, 35. “But it’s every phase. We’ve known each other for so many years ... since I was 13 ... in some capacity.”



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MUSTANGJoy

“From teacher to mentor to now someone that I genuinely consider a friend, I have the utmost respect for him,” Stepneski continued. “His vote of confidence has always meant so much.”

That inspiration is what led him to his career. After playing trumpet with the Mustangs, like Morgan did in his own era, Stepneski went on to study Music Education at Montclair State University. He spent two years as the Band Director of Hackettstown High School.

“I would have pursued this profession whether I landed at this job [in Clifton] or not. He keeps inspiring me, too,” said Stepneski. “His input after a half-time show is always so beneficial.”

It works, because Morgan gets to maintain a tie to the band and the students get a chance to engage with him at rehearsals or during the gather-rounds at the end of a performance.

“It’s a cool, unique thing based on the history of our band that not a lot of people get to experience,” said Stepneski. “Also, that he is still in town and tied to things close to the Community Band.”

Under the Lights

The highlights for Stepneski are numerous, partly because the entire band program runs for 11 months out of



Alyssa, Cameron and Bryan Stepneski.

the year. A big milestone last spring was the Marching Band’s invitation to perform with the Wind Ensemble for the State Band Gala Concert at The College of New Jersey.

What got the Mustangs there was taking home first gold at the North Jersey Concert Band Festival.

The band scored in the top four bands from 47 different schools and received the invitation to perform at the gala, featuring the top four schools from North, Central, and South Jersey and celebrating music excellence.

“That was a professional highlight and something that I look back on fondly,” said Stepneski.

The trips that they take are also exciting, including performing in New Orleans in February of 2024. The Mardi Gras performance tour saw them win 1st Place in the Krewe of Rex Parade. But Stepneski emphasized it’s the day-to-day rehearsals that can be “even better than those big, exciting moments.”

It’s so much of the job — but a joyful job — both for him and for the students.

“People often take for granted that we rehearse 90% of the time. Even on the most frustrating days or stressful occasions ... there’s always something that makes you laugh and smile,” he said. “It is very cool seeing kids come together and work hard toward a common goal. It feels good to be a part of that.”



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Maintaining tradition is a large part of achieving those common goals. Stepneski appreciates still doing the traditional pre-game show that “all bands at one point did and college bands still do.” It is also special to see students do what he, himself, once partook in, such as performing “What I Did for Love” as the end-of-the-season song and writing out “CHS” in cursive.

But there are new additions to what home and away spectators can expect from the Showband of the Northeast. Despite there no longer being a football game on Thanksgiving Day, there is a way for current students and alumni to all come together under the lights.

Literally and metaphorically, that is. But when the “Under the Lights” event was first established in Oc-



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MUSTANGJoy

tober of 2020, Stepneski and the others involved did not expect or plan on it becoming the annual Thanksgiving Eve tradition that it is today. It was a product of the coronavirus pandemic and the desire to do something fun and unifying in a year where little of that was possible.

When they first set a date, outdoor gatherings had a 500-person limit. They had already found that the limit did not go far with high school football once you factored in the families of football players on both teams, plus the families of band kids. That doesn't take into account any of the other necessary people in attendance.

"We were lucky if we had one ticket per band member per football game. Maybe the seniors ended up with two," said Stepneski. "It was important to do a band event for band people."

So they got permission and quickly hit the maximum of 500 people for the free event. It was designed differently from how it is today; at the time only meant to be a pre-game show. But everything came to a halt when they were told on their last rehearsal day that they needed to quarantine.

"It felt like two weeks, even if it wasn't. It was devastating having to cancel, because it was exciting to do something normal," explained Stepneski. "But when the kids came back, they were hungry. We found another day and amped it up, because we had more time to prepare."

Since it was closer to Veterans Day, they included an Armed Forces Salute and added some of their favorite football performance traditions that others might not have gotten to see. By Fall of 2021, the staff sat down to discuss what they should do since the final Thanksgiving Day game was back in 2019.

It was his wife, Alyssa, who reminded them about the success of the previous year's event and how it would be a good way to end the season "on our terms." That is when the event was first set for Thanksgiving Eve to guarantee that recent alumni would be home from college.

"After doing it that second time, we knew we were onto something and kept it going," Stepneski added. "Last year was the fifth one so, by that one, it was really a thing. The



missing piece was the Alumni Band."

Stepneski invited them to last year's event and said it made the night "that much more special." The Alumni Band played in the stands for intermission and then joined the current Mustangs on the field for "What I Did for Love".

By his estimate, there were nearly 100 alumni who came out and surpassed the number of band members on the field. It was a full stadium, with attendance that Stepneski reckoned was "better than some football games."

"I'm excited to see it continue to grow and stay the special thing that it is going forward," he said. "The coolest traditions are ones that you don't set out to make, they kind of prove themselves."

Newer Gains

The numbers tell a story: Under the Lights isn't the only thing that is growing.

Though not the size that it was at its peak, the Mustang Band has recouped from a dwindling turnout brought on by the coronavirus pandemic and its disruption to all aspects of education. During the 2019-20 season, there were 91 students total in the band.

Reviewing the records, Stepneski found that membership dropped to 79 for the 2020-21 season and again to 66 for the 2021-22. It fell one more time to 64 for the 2022-23 season until it turned a corner and they began rebuilding.

"The climb didn't start again until the 2023-2024 season with 74 students. We remained in that neighborhood last year and, this year, we're up to 90," said Stepneski. "We have never broken 100, but the Mustang Band was over 150 students at one point. It just feels good to be back to where we were pre-pandemic, for sure."

Stepneski is grateful for all of the talented kids that he

has worked with since returning in 2016. One former student was Nick Abraham (CHS 2021) on trumpet, a “stand-out talent” who did his performance recital at Berkeley College this past spring. There’s Donavin Leon (CHS 2019), a horn player who doubled as a student-composer and arranger for Stepneski.

There are also current college students like oboist and saxophonist Lily Kearney (CHS 2024), tuba player Andrew Sieradzki (CHS 2022), trumpeter John Rivas (CHS 2022), percussionist Luke Kulesa (CHS 2022) and triple-threat Tristan Rivera (CHS 2025), who sings, acts, and is highly proficient on the clarinet.

“I’m lucky. There are stand-out kids every year and it’s hard to pick just a few,” said Stepneski. “We’re definitely greater than the sum of our parts.”

“So many kids don’t go on to pursue music who were such important players when they were here,” he added. “That’s the unique thing about High School Band that makes it stand out.”

That passion isn’t waning for Stepneski. He’s eager to see where he and the band can take things and has aspirations for “the next two to three decades [if I am] lucky



enough to keep doing this.”

While he recognizes the commitment that it requires from both kids and their guardians, he hopes that everyone will keep an open mind about what Band can offer our youth.

“We’re not just composed of future music majors,” Stepneski emphasized. “Kids who do band go on to pursue all walks of life.”

That has included seeing kids become anything from an aerospace engineer to a teacher to a lawyer. There’s nothing, he said, that should stop a student from trying something new.

“Give it a year,” Stepneski encouraged. “The worst thing you can do is not even try because you think it’s not for you or that you can’t. It’s hard work, but anyone can do this.”



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The Magnitude OF THE Morgan Years

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By Ariana Puzzo

When Robert Morgan led the Marching Mustang Band as its storied band director, everyone knew the 4 D's. There was never any need to read between the lines. And there was always joy when the results followed.

"Yeah, they knew my expectations," said Morgan wryly. Earnestly, he added, "There's no such thing as a perfect half-time performance, but you're going to try to get it."

"They all bought into it," he continued. "So if I said, 'OK, let's run it back and do it again', once in a while they'd say, 'Oh, geez', but most of the time they ran it back."

More than a few former band kids remembered and mentioned the 4 D's when Clifton Merchant profiled them for stories and asked about their band memories. Many of the same students and plenty others went on to have successful music careers and experiences in the performing arts.

Morgan, who returned to teach in his hometown in 1972 and was the Mustang Band Director for 43 years, estimated that 32 of his former students became band directors for high schools or an instrumental music teacher.

"That's something," said Morgan, 77.

As for Morgan, the call from his hometown was strong and not one that he could ignore — nor did he want to. Before working at his alma mater, he was subbing down on Paulison Ave. over the border in Passaic. Eventually, the time came for him to make a choice.



“The Passaic people wanted me to stick around there ... and there were a lot of great memories and some really nice kids at Passaic,” said Morgan. “I did the old balancing act with my hands.”

“I just had that thing about Clifton,” he said, matter-of-factly. “I’m glad I went [back].”

From Master Sergeant to Mustang Conductor

Every Marching Mustang starts somewhere, and Morgan was no exception to that rule.

Growing up off Hazel St., Morgan recalled a childhood where “everyone knew everybody.” He attended School 4, then School 10, now the parking lot on Clifton Ave. and 1st St., for seventh and eighth grade. Once he got to the “new high school”, he was in the largest class that would graduate in 1966.

Returning to Colfax Ave. was more than just walking familiar halls; it was seeing familiar faces. One of those faces belonged to the late Principal Aaron Halpern who became Morgan’s boss.

“According to him ... he had a ‘best class’ and a ‘worst class.’ The best class was ‘66, because we had great kids but also we all came up together,” said Morgan. “He said, ‘I was at Columbus and so were you. I remember seeing you in the pit playing with the band.’”

“Then you went up to high school and, lo and behold [there you were],” he continued. “The kids in that class

were amazing. A lot of really brilliant kids and a darn good band.”

He went on to say that Halpern asserted his “worst year” was the Class of 1971, which Morgan remembers since Halpern would always bring it up when he ran into both Morgan and his wife, Michele, who taught in Clifton Public Schools for 38 years.

“That’s when all of the riots were going on and student demonstrations,” said Morgan. “Students were car-



Married for 48 years, Bob and Michele in 1998 with Dan (CHS 1998) and Matt (CHS 2002).

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Mustang Joy

rying a casket through the high school one day. That was my wife's class, and [Halpern] mentioned it a couple of times."

Remembering his days on the other side of the high school experience, Morgan acknowledged that he "had a good ride in Clifton." The earlier, alluded-to Marching Mustang beginnings? That involved him playing the trumpet in the band and becoming the Master Sergeant.

"Lucky me; I did all the grunt work," Morgan quipped. "The crew under me was known as the bandroom squad. It was seven guys who basically did everything. They handed out uniforms, set up the music and stages, loaded and unloaded the truck. All the dirty work, so-to-speak."

Today, those band members are known as the Quartermaster and band staff. During Morgan's band years, he also served as Rank Sergeant under the leadership of the late Saul Kay.

"I had a good relationship with him. The groups that followed, not so much," said Morgan. "They were kind of rude and crude to old Saul, but I never had any problems with him. We got along — he took care of me and I took care of him."

Kay worked for the Board of Education as a music teacher for 37 years before retiring in 1987. He was an

instructor of instrumental music, director of the Marching Mustangs, and the band director at Woodrow Wilson.

As CHS' band director, the Mustangs went to the Tournament of Roses Parade, the World Music Festival, the World's Fair in New York City and Expo 67.

The trips that Morgan's band kids took were similarly memorable, but they were different. Before he became Band Director, the Marching Band stopped going to the Netherlands in 1970. By the time the opportunity arose for them to resume the trip, Morgan's first group of parents weren't of the same mindset as past band parents.

The groups did still travel on an annual basis until it became cost prohibitive, then every other year was a major trip. That included band trips to the United Kingdom three or four times and three or four trips to perform at the Carnaval de Québec.

But it isn't just international trips that stand out for Morgan. And they left a mark on generations of band alumni as well.

Don't Mess With Mustangs

The Showband of the Northeast has amazed audiences for over eight decades, but they had something to prove in 1977.

The performers traveled to Texas, where they performed at the Alamo Stadium in San Antonio at a big



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Mustang Joy

band festival. Not unlike, Morgan described, what was the Herald News Band Festival, now the North Jersey Band Festival.

“We went on, close to the end of the show and, as the kids were getting ready to go on, some local TV news guy was reading a script,” said Morgan. “He said, ‘Well, they call themselves The Showband of the Northeast. I guess we’ll see about that, won’t we?’ I said to him, ‘I don’t think you should’ve said that.’ He said, ‘Why?’ and I said, ‘It ticked them off.’”

The Mustangs came out smoking. As Morgan watched with an astonished crowd, he never saw a cadence so short. There were a lot of cute gimmicks to the performance and it included playing Saturday morning cartoon tunes.

One tune was Baby Elephant Walk and, at one point, the tubas were out in front bouncing and dancing. The performance led to the Mustangs receiving a standing ovation from everybody in the audience.

“As we left the field and went around in front of the participating bands, they all stood up ... and started chanting, ‘You are number one,’” said Morgan. “I felt bad for the group that was following us, who were a relatively local group. They had to wait 10 minutes before the crowd had calmed down.”

Then there was the Mustangs’ performance in New Orleans for the Bicentennial in 1976. The band paraded down Bourbon St. and Edwin Edwards, the 50th governor of Louisiana, was in attendance.

“We had gifts to present to them in front of the reviewing stand that came from Clifton, because we were a bicentennial city,” said Morgan. “Then [Lieutenant Governor Jimmy Fitzmorris] got up and said, ‘Well, we’re not going to be outdone by any damn yankees’ and pulled the State Flag and gave it to me. We were honorary state senators for Louisiana.”

An event that meant a lot to the band kids, though, was when they went to Honolulu and got a chance to play for students at a special needs school. Morgan remembered how the kids were complaining about the heat and being thirsty, but listened when he told them to mix and mingle with the kids after their performance.



Drum majorettes and a major at the 2017 Thanksgiving home game. From left, John Komar '07-08, Michelle Zerelek '16-17, Farrah Mavrikos '95-96, Mackenzie Miller '17-18, Julie Passaro Krygsman '00-01, Rebecca Brand '13-14 and Sydney Pangaro '15-16.

“All of a sudden, when they saw these kids, it humbled everybody. All of a sudden, it wasn’t so hot,” said Morgan. “We had kids banging on the drums and carrying on. It was one of the most rewarding performances that we ever gave.”

Talent Across the Decades

The Mustang Band has never cracked 200 kids, but they came pretty close.

“I think our biggest group was about 175 kids. When looking to get new uniforms, we expected to break 200,” said Morgan. “For some reason, we didn’t get [that many], because a bunch of eighth graders decided not to come out.”

It was disappointing not becoming a “for-real big band” at their peak, but the numbers stayed consistent to that for quite a few years. It was once the 2000s hit that the size dwindled.

Morgan chalked it up to a mix of factors.

“Kids just didn’t want to put the time in but, more than that, the parents didn’t want to put in the commitment that the parents of years-gone-by did,” said Morgan. “Demographics also started to change. There were first-generation kids with parents who didn’t know anything about football or half-time shows. So that kind of gave us a little bit of a hit, too.”

He emphasized that a lot of “great kids” still came out for the band and they were “hard-working, dedicated, and smart. The best kids of CHS were all in the band. The best kids in any school are involved in the band,” Morgan asserted. “It shows by what they went on to do, like the number of kids that graduated and went onto college or technical schools.”



James Moscati
(1938-1950)



Stanley Opalach
(1950-1956)



Saul Kay
(1956-1970)



Patrick Curcio
(1970-1972)

Prior to Morgan picking up the baton and then followed by Bryan Stepneski taking over in 2015, the former Marching Mustangs directors are pictured here.

One of Morgan's memorable students included Serge Yow, who played the trumpet for the Maynard Ferguson Orchestra in the 1980s, as well as the 590th AirForce Band, the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, and the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

There was also Nan Raphael, one of Morgan's first students who was a solo piccoloist with the US Army Field Band for 26 years. Her other achievements included becoming a piccoloist with the Maryland Lyric Opera and releasing five piccolo CDs and a book of piccolo excerpts from the symphonic band repertoire. Her work is available on nanraphael.com.

"She was a big stand-out," said Morgan. "I'm really proud to have that experience with Nan." A more recent Mustang grad was Michael Troller (CHS 2017), who "dot- ted the i" on Sept. 10, 2022 in the Ohio State Marching

Band. Troller played the sousaphone for four years at CHS, and he earned his spot in The Best Damn Band In The Land in Fall of 2019. When he got to perform the honor that is reserved for a fourth- or fifth-year sousaphone player, it was in the presence of family, friends, and his former Mustang band directors.

Saying that it was significant, especially since performing the acclaimed script formation is a big deal for generations of Marching Mustangs, would be an understatement.

"He was my last freshman and I got him back again when I returned," said Morgan. "When he found out that he was going to Ohio State, I said, 'When you "dot the i", I want to be there.'"

Years later "his mother called and spoke to my wife and said, 'Guess who's going to "dot the i"?' " he continued. "What a great feeling that was to see that happen."

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Election Day 2025

Thanks to engaged and motivated voters, the Democrats won big in Clifton and throughout New Jersey as our Party cemented New Jersey's Blue State status.

Congratulations to Governor-elect Mikie Sherrill and Dale Caldwell (Lt. Governor) as well as Alixon Collazos-Gill and Rosy Bagolie for their 27th District Assembly wins, and Mile Ramaglia and Christina Schratz, who will serve as Passaic County Commissioners.

I'm proud to have worked with our Clifton team to get-out-the-vote and make Clifton Blue again! Thank You Voters...

John D. Pogorelec, Jr., Esq.
Clifton Democratic County Committee City Leader

To get involved write to: jpogorelecjr@yahoo.com

Paid for by the personal funds of John D. Pogorelec, Jr., Esq.



Marching Mustang alum and community musicians alike in rehearsal are directed by Maestro Bob Morgan of the Clifton Community Band. Their next performance—Snowflakes & Sleigh Rides—is a free concert on Dec. 6 at 3 pm at CHS. For info on membership write to CliftonBand@optonline.net, call 973-777-1781 or go to mustangbandalumni.com/clifton-community-band.

And the Band Played On

And that continued relevance in the Clifton Schools and community is in no small part due to the leadership of Morgan's other former student, Bryan Stepneski.

Describing the CHS 2009 grad as "kind of a quiet kid who always had a smile on", Morgan said Stepneski could've gone to any number of schools.

"He would've been a great candidate for a Big 10 school, but Bryan got a good foundation at Montclair State and it shows, obviously," said Morgan. "He was a really nice kid and he never gave me any trouble, which was good, because there were a few in that class I think that liked to be a little bit shticky."

As a part of the Clifton Community Band, founded by Morgan in 2002, Stepneski is known to set aside his trumpet and "uses his brass class techniques" to play the euphonium. Morgan has him conducting the band as well.

"There are a bunch of guys that I'm thinking about grooming to take over when I retire from the Community Band," said Morgan. "Right now with a young child and the Marching Band as it is, he doesn't quite have the time to do it yet. But he's a very likable guy."

The Community Band meets Tuesday nights in the CHS Band Room from 7-9 pm with no fees, membership dues or auditions. The group is open to senior citizens down to eighth graders. The group's nucleus is about 60 people attending on a regular basis, consisting of former alums, music teachers, and business people. The holidays also draw in a few more high schoolers and summer welcomes college students who have returned home.



The Community Band performs September through July and is sponsored by the Mustang Band Alumni Association and Clifton Rec.

Living on Lincoln Ave. with wife Michele for 48 years, the Cliftonites are the parents of Dan (CHS 1998) and Matthew (CHS 2002) and grandparents of three boys and three girls ages 12 to 2. During his sons' years in the band, Dan played the trumpet and Matthew was a drummer. Both boys rose to Rank Sergeant and Matthew was also in the Wind Ensemble.

"I treated them there like they were any other kid," said Morgan. Laughing, he added, "There were times that I had to yell at them, too." Looking back, Morgan said that those four decades amounted to "a good ride in Clifton."

"It never felt like I was going to work," he said. "I would say, 'I gotta get up and go to school tomorrow' and the kids would get a kick out of that."



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Kelly Aguilar (CHS 2016), Amy Aguilar (CHS 2018), Axel Aguilar (CHS 2023), Elvira's mother Graciella Hernandez, Elvira Almazo, Mario Aguilar, and Dennis Aguilar (CHS 2020).

By Ariana Puzzo

We're going to walk down to Clinton Ave., and you can bet each year that Elvira Almazo and Mario Aguilar will take it higher with their holiday decor.

It started in dark times, shortly after they bought their Downtown Clifton house in 2020. Almazo recalled how the street was quiet and dark in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Seeing that sadness and isolation inspired her to do something for all the kids and families.

"I was like, 'This street needs a little bit of light,'" said Almazo, 47. "I wanted to see families together."

Aguilar didn't need much convincing.

"I said, 'Yes, let's do that. I always agree with what my wife comes [up with] to do,'" he laughed. "Every year, she does something different."



There's certainly a community precedent for holiday spirit, including the Grecos handing out coffee and donuts on Windsor Rd. for Halloween or Dr. Wayne Gangi's decades-long, highly publicized Halloween house on Grove St.

The Recreation Department's annual Holiday Door Decorating Contest is also a fun activity for families and open to all city residents. The registration deadline is Dec. 5 by 4 pm. The judging period begins Dec. 8 and continues throughout the week. Required pre-registration is available on cliftonrec.com or by calling the Rec Department's office at 973-470-5956.

But the Clinton Ave. winter spectacle is entirely their own, and decorating to this scale was a brand new endeavor for Almazo. It took careful planning after living on the busy Clifton Ave., which meant they had a limited number of trick-or-treaters.

"It was hard for parents to park and stop by. I basically [decorated] on a small scale," she said. "Now I'm thinking ahead about what I should do differently for the next year, and what to do to be authentic. To have fun."

They have their own little workshop of helping hands. There is Polo Ramirez, a family friend who is "always here helping us" and isn't afraid to get up on the roof.



There is also Graciella Hernandez, who is Almazo's mother and lives with the family.

"My mom is the backbone of the family. She is one of the biggest helpers," said Almazo. "When we are decorating outside, she's inside doing everything and keeping us warm by making us coffee and cooking almost every day during the week that we're decorating."

Then, of course, there are their four kids: Kelly



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Aguilar (CHS 2016), Amy Aguilar (CHS 2018), Dennis Aguilar (CHS 2020), and Axel Aguilar (CHS 2023). Everyone participates and they all clean up and put everything away once the holiday has ended.

“We appreciate every little or big thing that our kids do. It’s not unnoticed. We notice everything,” said Almazo. “This is something that we all do as a family.”

Inspired By Their Neighbors

The festivities may be year-round, but so is their consideration for their neighbors.

People walking or driving by 204 Clinton Ave. can see decorations for major holidays like Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter, and the Fourth of July. But nothing compares to the sights on Halloween and Christmas.

Almazo’s favorite decorations are her inflatable black cats, measuring at 20-ft., and her 15-ft. Jack the Skeleton that she “must have” for Halloween. For Christmas, you can expect to see Santa and Mrs. Claus, standing tall at 22-ft., and a sled with two big reindeers.

Both husband and wife’s jobs lend themselves to the decorating process in different ways. As a medical assistant and owner of her own delivery business, Almazo has flexible hours. Aguilar’s background as a skilled carpenter also comes in handy.

“I built the Halloween carriage that is made out of wood and came up with that idea,” said Aguilar, 50. “I also built the skeleton horse. I made the sleds and the chocolate stand for Christmas.”

The Halloween decorations go up in the first week of October, which takes about eight to 12 hours of work per day for a week, and come down immediately after the holiday. That usually takes about two or three days.

“If the holiday is over, I can’t have anything up front,” said Almazo. “I feel like it’s a mess. We also try to bring everything down, because the stuff [will otherwise get] damaged.”

Christmas takes longer, usually about a week and a half or two weeks, because the weather is colder. Those decorations can be seen from the first week of December until Jan. 6. And those dates are non-negotiable for a good reason.

Once the holidays are over, Almazo makes it a point to speak with the neighbors to ask if any of the decor bothered them. The response is always unanimous that the neighborhood loves them and hopes that they return next



year. It's important for Almazo that they regularly check.

"For Halloween, a lot of people want us to turn on the lights. I explain to them: 'I had them up for almost a month, and now I have to think about my neighbors,'" said Almazo. "They also like their privacy and once the holiday is over, I can't. People understand."

"Every neighbor is good to us," said Aguilar. "They're nice people."

A Bright Reputation

Born in Mexico, the husband-and-wife decorating duo immigrated to the U.S. when they were adolescents.

Aguilar's family settled in Paterson in 1989, whereas Almazo came to the country in 1990 and lived in Passaic. The couple later moved to Clifton in 2000 to raise their four children.

Almazo reminisced on her own childhood memories of the holidays in Mexico.

"On Día de Muertos, we pray to our loved ones who have passed away," said Almazo. "It's different in the sense of the holiday there. Everything there is family."

But that's a tradition and way of life that they've never sacrificed and refuse to take for granted. During the holidays, Almazo and Aguilar's sides of the family get together at their house for a gathering of about 25 to 30 people.

"We are a Hispanic family, so we love to be together," said Almazo. "Our youngest is 21 and is still at home. Our

oldest is 28 and is still at home. [The joy of the season is] just being together and healthy with family."

And if they meet new faces or see familiar ones in the colder months, even better. They've had holiday enthusiasts travel to see them based on videos shared on social media, including some from Trenton, New Brunswick, and South Jersey, as well as Pennsylvania and New York.

One woman was visiting from Puerto Rico and, having heard about the decorations, knew that she needed to stop by before catching her flight.

"She couldn't come at night, because she was leaving," said Almazo, "but she came to see the decorations during the day."

All are welcome, and the number has risen over the past five years. Last year, the family bought 5,000 pieces of candy to give out on Halloween. They bought 9,000 pieces of candy this year — and only two bags of 250 candy pieces were remaining.

"People keep saying, 'Why don't you charge?' but that's not my style," said Almazo. "We like to see people happy. I don't want to make money out of this. Maybe I'll charge for a charity in the future, but not at the moment."

Giving back fills them with joy, and so does seeing respect shown by others in their city.

"We love our community [and how] it's very diverse. We see people of every ethnicity," said Almazo. "We kind of protect each other."

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Odette and Noel Coronel with their kids: Olivia, Noelani and Noel

The Joy of being Mrs. Claus

By Ariana Puzzo

There is plenty of joy in Botany Village when Clifton kids meet Mr. and Mrs. Claus, but Gina Scaduto also feels the gratitude from Botany adults when old Saint Nick and his better half come to town.

The lifelong resident has assumed the role of Mrs. Claus for the past three years and, although she lives in the Richfield section, said she'll "drop everything to do anything for Botany families." It's especially important to her that residents in the Botany neighborhood receive what others in our city do.

Even when they don't in other ways, she wants to make sure that the Christmas spirit is felt, especially since the neighborhood never does things by halves.

"The Christmas display that they do and the tree lighting is better than the one at City Hall, I have to say," said Scaduto, 59. "They really go all out."

The 20th Annual Botany Village Christmas Tree Lighting is Dec. 5 from 6-9 pm in Sullivan Square on Parker and Lake Ave. The event will include free pictures with Santa and other characters, plus free gifts, free cookies and milk, and free face painting for all children.

"There are always smiles on babies' faces and on their families faces, and we are always taking pictures," said Scaduto. "I think I took 500 pictures last year with the families."

Questions? Call or text Joe Waninger at 856-900-2200 or email Margaret Kardasz at gosiaa1723@gmail.com.

And when we spoke in mid-November, she had already



In 2024, Mr. and Mrs. Claus (also known as Ron Ossi and Gina Scaduto) at JK Realty with Robin Waterman Gibson and Rickey DiMaria. Gina's family below: Kayleigh, husband Mike, and Lexi.



helped wrap 537 gifts for children and made a giant red box with a snowman on it. The box took two days to complete and is sparkly, with a ribbon around it, which Scaduto thinks will appeal to kids as a new way to receive gifts.

She has worked closely with Clifton's Historic Botany District's President Margaret Kardasz, of George's Coffee Shop, since discovering that Kardasz needed some extra hands.

"I jumped right into that spot," said Scaduto.

Do you need Mrs. Claus? Scaduto is happy to show up for other events. Call or text her at 973-248-7428.

Family Cheer

Although being Mrs. Claus in Botany is for the kids, it was also Scaduto's way of supporting her best friend. That would be Robin Gibson, the former Mrs. Claus.

"When [Councilman Bill Gibson] started to get sick, Robin couldn't really leave him alone for a long time," said Scaduto. "She asked if I could take over this part, and I just love it. I'm doing it for them and for the children."

One year a young girl made her and Santa a pretend-telephone gift out of paper and tape with numbers on it. Last year, Scaduto was handed a one-week-old baby.

"I almost didn't want to give her back. She was the cutest little thing," laughed Scaduto (CHS 1984). "She was so brand new that I was afraid to hold her, but her mom was like, 'Here.'"

"It all circulates around being with children for me," she continued. "I find such joy in that."

It is the same with her own family, both while growing up and today. Scaduto grew up on Grove St. and had strong bonds with parents Patrick and Bernice Matano, her older brother Patrick Jr. (CHS 1977), and her uncle Americo Matano.

Although they have all since passed, she remembers them most profoundly during the holiday season as she celebrates old and newer traditions with her husband and children. Scaduto is married to Mike, who graduated from Paul VI in 1990, and has two grown children: Lexi (CHS 2012) and Kayleigh (CHS 2021).

When she is dressed as her Christmas alter ego, Scaduto feels Mike's presence and love.

"He is a big supporter. He stays with me all the time and helps with handing out the gifts," she said. "He stands back and watches me love all these kids."

They go as a family into the city each Christmas Eve for dinner and to see the Rockettes. They also visit the Christmas Tree at Rockefeller Center, the M&M store, and even the American Girl Doll Store to relive their daughters' childhoods.

It culminates with tracking Santa's route so they can see him pass through their neighborhood once they get home and then getting into matching pajamas to exchange one gift. But tracking Santa, even if they don't make it home in time to see him riding by their house, is a big unifier.

"My whole life is following Santa as much as I can for my daughters," said Scaduto. "Both of my kids are so into Christmas all the time, and they're older, too. I love that we all enjoy it."

"It's fun, but it's also sad, because I miss my mom, dad, uncle, and brother," she continued. "But that is why it's very important to me that I spend as much time with my family as I can."

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Joy IN THE EVERYDAY

By Robert Niessen

Moments of Joy

Christmas Eve is a night that reaches beyond presents — it's about connection for Sylwia Grabowski. Through the Polish tradition of Wigilia, she discovered at a young age how faith and family come together in a night filled with warmth, love, and lasting meaning.

It's a tradition that she now continues with her own children, Julia and Jonathan.

"The Polish tradition of Wigilia is our Christmas Eve tradition," said Grabowski (CHS 1999). "It brings my family deep comfort and joy year after year, because it connects us to our roots, our faith, and one another."

The evening begins in stillness, as everyone waits for the first star to appear — a quiet, almost sacred signal that it's time to gather. When the family sits down, the familiar rituals gently unfold: the opłatek wafer is broken and shared, each exchange carrying wishes for health, happiness, and peace in the year ahead.

"The breaking of the opłatek, the sharing of wishes, and the passing of each traditional dish wrap us in a deep sense of peace and belonging," Grabowski said.

The glow of candlelight and the scent of pierogi and barszcz fill the home, carrying with them memories of loved ones and years gone by. For Grabowski, those small, familiar details are what keep the meaning of Wigilia alive.

"Even as time passes and life changes, the love and togetherness at the heart of Wigilia remain constant," she explained. Now, she said, it's her turn to pass that feeling on to her children.



Always full of life and gratitude, Maria Kosmider. Below, Sylwia Grabowski with kids Jonathan and Julia.

"It is more than a meal," Grabowski said. "It's a moment of reflection, gratitude, and unity that fills our hearts with the quiet joy of being home."

First American Christmas

The glow of holiday lights, the sound of bells ringing, and the hum of Christmas music in the air — for many, these are the signs that the season has arrived. But for Maria Kosmider, those sights and sounds meant something even more profound.

In December of 1963, as a young girl newly arrived from Poland, she experienced her very first American Christmas.

"There were men dressed in red suits ringing bells, music everywhere. It was a magical introduction to the holiday season," she recalled. "And it still is, to this day."

That first winter in America left an impression on the 1971 CHS grad that has lasted a lifetime. Every year since, Kosmider has found joy not just in the sparkle of Christmas but in the people who share it with her.



The best part is “spending time with family and friends. Eating, drinking, dancing, just having fun,” said Kosmider, who lives in the Richfield section. Those moments of laughter and connection, she added, are what make the season truly special.

Even winter’s chill carries warm memories. She remembers bus trips to Killington, Vermont, where her son, Stan, skied and her daughter, Jennifer, wanted to learn.

“At age 45, I took my first lesson,” Kosmider said with a laugh. “Many more lessons after that — and at 73, I still can’t ski.” Even so, her outlook remains joyful.

“Now I’m just enjoying my family and friends, going out dancing, lots of walking, and volunteering at different events,” Kosmider said.

Kosmider worked at Clifton Savings Bank from September of 1971 until retiring as the Assistant Vice President / Branch Manager in March of 2018.

Nowadays, Kosmider carries the spirit of the season all year round and finds joy not only in celebration but in connection, kindness, and the simple beauty of sharing life with others. It’s that outlook that keeps her heart young and her spirit bright. It’s what makes her feel, as she said, “73 years young.”



Coach Kishan Trivedi.

Moments of Joy

The smell of good food, the echo of laughter, and the thrill of game day. Fall and winter bring together everything that makes the season special for Kishan Trivedi.

Between holiday parties, family dinners, and sports, it’s the Athenia resident’s “favorite time of the year for many reasons. I really enjoy all the family parties and dinners,” said Trivedi (CHS 2018). “Great food, great laughs, and ever-lasting memories.”

The season is about tradition and togetherness; the kind of moments that linger long after the simple joy found in laughter, warmth, and shared memories. Trivedi, 25, carries that same passion beyond the dinner table and on

the pitch as assistant CHS Boys Varsity Soccer coach.

As the leagues started, he said it’s “the best time of year for sports.” Between coaching his players, watching professional teams, and feeling the buzz of competition in the air, this season reminds him of why he loves the game.

Whether he is helping players sharpen their skills or taking in a match from home, Trivedi finds joy in the dedication, energy, and camaraderie that define this time of year. It’s a feeling that, for him, makes fall and winter truly special.



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JOY IN THE EVERYDAY

Off the field, Trivedi pours that same energy into his work as a Realtor Associate for Gild Realty, helping others find new places to call their home. “The new year will come with new challenges,” he explained. “I look forward to helping as many of my clients as possible in successfully selling or buying a home.”

The season’s true meaning is about balance; celebrating both hard work and heart-felt moments, and carrying that warmth and motivation into the new year. But more importantly: “I can’t wait to create new memories with my family and friends.”

New Year, More Optimism

On the turf of Fernando Rossi Field at CHS, where generations of Clifton players have left their mark, Thiago Ovalle is working toward a dream that’s as ambitious as it is personal.

At just 15, the Allwood resident has a clear goal for the new year — to bring a state championship back home.

“Ever since I first stepped onto the pitch ... my dream



Mustang Thiago Ovalle.

has been to bring a New Jersey State Championship back home,” Ovalle said. “This program is built on championship, excellence, and tradition, which are values that have been carried through generations of players who fought with pride for the Clifton badge.”

The sophomore speaks about the soccer program with the same reverence that others reserve for family. Every practice and game is part of something much larger — a legacy that connects the past, present, and future.

“I grew up watching those moments; the games, the history, the unwavering belief that anything was possible,” the goalkeeper recalled. “I want to relive them, not just as a player, but as a leader on that same field.”

That sense of purpose drives him to look beyond the present season.

“My goal is to honor the past by pushing us into a new era,” Ovalle said. “One where we don’t just remember the soccer legends who came before us but become the next ones.”

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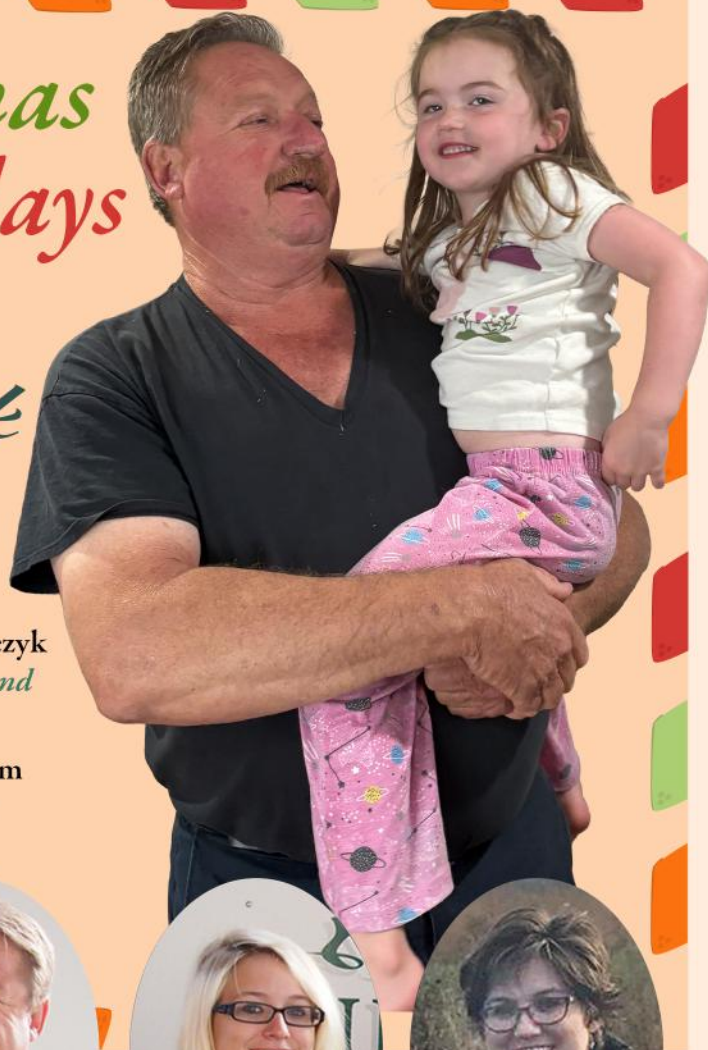
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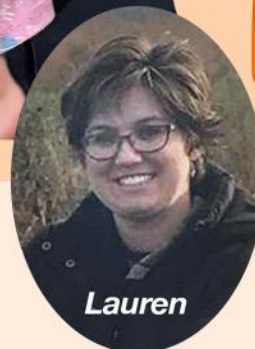
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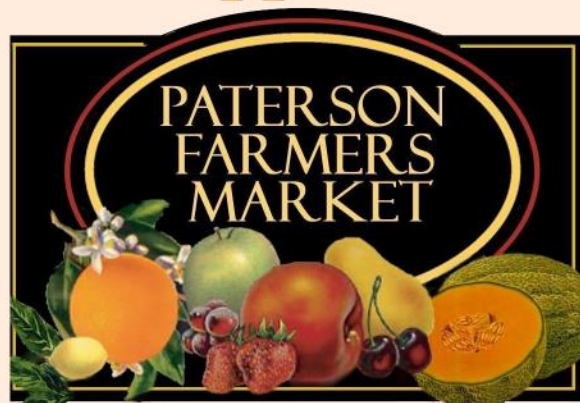
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JOY IN THE EVERYDAY

Every dive, save, and shout of direction from the goal isn't just part of the game. It's part of protecting Clifton's proud tradition. Moments between the posts are tests of his focus and resilience, as well as a chance to defend the net and the legacy that was built by those who wore the jersey before him.

That vision drives him every day, even when the work is difficult. He credited the discipline and mentality instilled by head coach Stan Lembryk and his staff for shaping not only his skills, but also his mindset.

"Through every practice, challenge, and sacrifice, I discipline myself for one vision," Ovalle said. "To lift a title for Clifton Soccer once again and leave behind a legacy that inspires the players who will follow in our footsteps."

As the new year begins, Ovalle's focus is steady. His dream isn't just to win; it's to honor the history that has inspired him since he was a child. And if his determination is any sign, Clifton Soccer's next great chapter may already be taking shape, one practice at a time.

Spreading Kindness

The new year often inspires people to set resolutions — to work harder, eat healthier, or chase new goals. But for Sofia Syed, a CHS junior, her focus for 2026 isn't on achievement or change; it's on kindness.

"One way we can all be happier and spread more joy in 2026," said Syed, 17, "is by spreading kindness everywhere." It's a simple statement but, for Syed, it carries a lot of meaning.

"Last year was a challenging academic year," she explained. "It made it hard to balance my personal life and my educational responsibilities. This led me to deal with a lot of stress and discouragement toward myself."

The pressure to do well, she said, sometimes made her lose sight of her own well-being. But even in the most difficult moments, there was something — or rather, someone — that kept her moving forward.

"One thing that led me to keep trying my best was surrounding myself with positive influences, such as my sister, my friends, and supportive teachers," Syed shared. "Having these people around me, I was able to gain the encouragement that I needed to keep pushing forward."

Through that experience, Syed realized how powerful support and understanding can be.

"It made me realize how important it is to check up on others," Syed said, "because you never know what someone could be going through."



Rhea Palmer and Sofia Syed collecting food items at CHS for the Clifton Free Pantry.

Sometimes what seems small like a smile, a kind word, or a quick text can have a much deeper effect than we think. Syed is now intentional about those gestures, whether it's reaching out to a classmate, offering encouragement, or simply making someone laugh after a long day.

"A simple 'How are you?' or even a small compliment can brighten someone's day," Syed said.

That mindset has changed how she sees the world around her. Syed discovered that kindness isn't something reserved for the holidays or big moments. It's something to be practiced every day and through every interaction.

"One thing I will carry with me in the new year is to always check in on others," Syed said. "Even if it's a small interaction, it can make a big difference in someone's life."

As she looks toward 2026, Syed hopes that her message will inspire others to do the same — to slow down, notice people, and care a little more. Because joy, she's learned, doesn't come from perfection or success; it comes from the connections that we make and the compassion that we show others.

In a world that often feels rushed and divided, Syed's resolution feels refreshingly simple and profoundly human.

“Spreading kindness everywhere,” she said, “is how we can all make life a little brighter.”

At 26, the Countdown to ‘26

Some people count down to the new year with sparklers and champagne. Joanna Huster counts down with something a little different: curiosity.

The Greglawn Dr. resident, and CHS’ CAST I and Communications/Public Speaking teacher, approaches each January not with a list of resolutions. She approaches it with an open mind and a willingness to explore what comes next.

“I’m not one for New Year’s resolutions,” admitted Huster, 26. “I feel like each moment can be a chance to start something new.”

Waiting for the perfect date on the calendar has never made much sense to Huster.

“You don’t need the start of a day, week, month, or year,” she said. “You can make that change the moment you decide you need a new start or challenge.”

It doesn’t mean that Huster enters 2026 without inten-



CHS teacher Joanna Huster.

tion. While resolutions may not be her style, goals definitely are. Her first goal is simple but meaningful: traveling more.

The world feels like a classroom of its own to Huster, filled with new people, new ideas, and perspectives worth discovering. Right behind travel on her list is a plan to “find new hobbies.” That is a challenge that she treats almost like an adventure.

Huster reminds her students of the same thing: that trying something new has a way of lighting up the parts of life that routine can dim.

And above all, she wants to “continue to make sure I’m prioritizing my mental and physical health.”

It’s a commitment that she treats as non-negotiable and is one that shapes the way that she teaches, works, and moves through her everyday life.

She might not be the “new year, new me” type, but Huster has her own version of a reset button. It is one fueled by curiosity, optimism, and the belief that growth doesn’t require a calendar date.

Wishing you Warm Thoughts this Holiday Season!



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The Pienciaks, in front, twins Jackson and Lila. Second row, from left, son Ryan and Susan, Hudson, Adele, Cheryl, Willow, Rick, son Adam and Hannah.

Traditions...

By Ariana Puzzo

Old-School Traditions

Someone always ends up with a bigger piece of the opiatek, but Richard Pienciak doesn't mind the mischief. All that he feels is an abundance of unity and blessings when three generations of Pienciaks gather around the holiday table.

The Polish traditions that Pienciak continues in his Albion neighborhood home are ones that he celebrated as a child growing up in Linden. Christmas Eve means that everyone can expect the table to be filled with plenty of cream of mushroom soup, old-school borscht, pierogies and, as mentioned, opiatek.

Breaking the thin, unleavened wafer is a symbol of reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity of the family. Each per-

...are really just warm hugs that wrap their arms around you, even when people are long gone... **Gina (Grosso) Doane**

son offers a piece of the wafer and blessings to everyone else gathered with a wish for good luck, prosperity, and peace in the new year.

"We hope that tradition keeps going on with our kids and that they'll keep it going on Christmas Eve," said Pienciak, 75. Pienciak and his wife, Cheryl, have lived in our city since 1981. It's where they raised their sons Ryan (CHS 1997), a former percussionist in the CHS Marching Band and Jazz Band, and Adam (CHS 2004), who was a pitcher and first baseman for Varsity Baseball.

Cheryl is presently the secretary of the Clifton Education Foundation and taught third grade at School 8 for 25 years, receiving the 2020-2021 Governor's Educator of the

Year for School 8. Prior to her Clifton Public Schools tenure, she taught preschool at Grove Hill Nursery School.

As for Pienciak, a noted author and journalist, some of his most joyful memories have involved looking forward to Santa's drive through town on Christmas Eve. The drive-by always led to his sons running for the front porch, and now it's the same with his five grandkids: Adele, Jackson, Lila, Willow, and Hudson.

"I admired the dedication of [former Mayor James Anzaldi], because he [was part of the parade] for so many years," said Pienciak. "We will hear the noise in the distance and then sure enough, around the bend comes the mini parade. We'd do that every year."

Coming Together As One

It's not only about celebrating Christmas in the Pienciak household. Cheryl is Jewish, and there is often an overlap in celebrating all of the family's customs when Christmas and Hanukkah fall close on the calendar.

"So we celebrate both and the little kids love getting presents twice," Pienciak laughed. "That is one benefit of [a mixed-faith] marriage."

Whether it's the family gathering to light the menorah over the eight days to mark the "festival of lights", or trying to squeeze 11 people into a family photo wearing matching Christmas pajamas, there's plenty of love to go around, especially when Adam's family is in from Colorado Springs.



Martin Grosso with grandsons Jamie Doane and John Grosso.

It partly reminds Pienciak of his own multi-generational family memories, which included eating together on Christmas Eve before attending Midnight Mass.

"At which time, my father would always complain about the church's pews being crowded with people who he said 'only attended Mass on the holidays,'" said Pienciak. "We always had to hear him say this and were like, 'OK, Dad.'"

After Midnight Mass, Pienciak's family would go to his grandmother's house and eat a meal at "some god-aw-

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Keith Oakley with his children, from left, Maryfrancis, Kara, Keith, Emilie, Mathew. Keith's parents Lewis and Mary.

ful hour ... like 1:30 or 2 am. Then we'd go home to sleep and, the next day, it was Christmas," he said.

When he and Cheryl were first married and living in Clifton, they would celebrate Christmas with his parents who are now deceased. These days, there are still happy faces in the house leading up to the holiday's actual date.

"Cheryl is such a baker, so she spends a lot of hours baking Christmas cookies," said Pienciak. "Now one of my granddaughters religiously comes over and helps with them."

Christmas Memories at Camp Clifton

If you were a Camp Clifton kid, you probably remember Mr. and Mrs. Claus and the joy they brought to the community, no matter the age.

That joy was felt during the holiday season and year-round by Keith Oakley, whose parents Lewis and Mary donned the festive attire to make memories for generations of Cliftonites.

"Dad was a skinny guy, so they had to pad him up," laughed Oakley (CHS 1971). "They both loved doing that and the kids loved it. Even if you didn't have much in those days, you didn't care."

Having an abundance of love and community, the Oakleys' cup runneth over. Lewis, a US Army veteran, and Mary, a CHS 1939 grad and later secretary for 35 years at the Boys Club of Clifton, raised their children in the Dutch Hill section.

Oakley was the second oldest of four children, which included older sister Barbara Evans (CHS 1964) and younger siblings Wayne (CHS 1973) and Cindy Weber (CHS 1977). Memories from Christmastime that still stand out to him

were when they would receive Army-themed gifts, like Army uniforms, GI Joe figurines, or the toy Army Jeeps.

"My brother and I would both get the same, because that's what you did in those days. Those are great memories," said Oakley, 72. "So was everyone coming over to our house."

"These kids from the Club would come over to our house for everything," he continued. "There was always food in our house, so everyone would come and eat."

In July 2023, Oakley and his wife, Michele, retired down to South Carolina. Their adult children are Mathew, Kara, Maryfrancis and Emilie, and Oakley's step-son is Andrew. The retirees have four granddaughters.

Getting together with family brings them the most joy during this time of year, which Oakley said is easier with a sister, niece, and several friends nearby.

"Ten of us live in our town of 1,000 people. We live on a dirt road on 54 acres of cow farm, but there is still family here and we get together," said Oakley. "Everyone makes their favorite dish or dessert, and that's what we do."

His advice for spreading joy and happiness in 2026? Well, like Mr. Claus, he knows when his hometown has been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!

"I still hear all the stuff going on in Clifton with the City Council," said Oakley. "I go to city council meetings down here, and it's the most fantastic thing ever. There are little arguments but, after a meeting, everyone goes and shakes each other's hands. There's no yelling and cursing."

"You don't have to agree with everybody," he continued, "but here, you can't even get off a line at a food store without talking to people. Of course, that's good for me, because I love it."



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JOY IN TRADITIONS

Honoring Martin's Holiday Magic

If Gina (Grosso) Doane could bottle one feeling, it would be the magic of all the Christmas Eves spent as her father's helper in the kitchen.

She now preserves those memories by passing them down to her son, Jamie, and making sure food remains at the center of what it means to grow up in an Italian-American family, especially around Christmastime. Cooking with her beloved late father, Martin Grosso (CHS 1967), is something that Doane did as soon as she could "see over the kitchen counter."

It meant she got a front-row seat to the preparation of steaming clams for the linguini and clam sauce, watching the live lobsters squirm in their bucket, admiring the precision of crafting the baccala salad, and feeling that ever-palpable excitement for the Feast of the Seven Fishes.

"As a child, I loved being a little helper and learning all about my grandfather's recipes that he passed down to my father," said Doane (CHS 2001). "But I could never have



Martin and Dianne Grosso in 2008 with Gina.

known how meaningful those moments in the kitchen would become later."

The magic of the night was not contained to one year, or one room. Describing it as "organized chaos", the rhythm of the night would flow from Martin's kitchen into the dining room. That was where cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents shared in the merriment of the holiday season.

The outside world did still reach them. Christmas Eve

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would culminate with “the time-honored Clifton tradition of the firetrucks and Santa charging down Dumont Ave.” Doane would wait on the corner of Maplewood Ave. with her mother, Dianne Grosso (CHS 1967); her brother, Tony Grosso (CHS 1996); her cousins, and neighborhood friends.

“[We were] all bundled up in our holiday clothes and dress coats,” she recalled, “waiting for the signal that we should lay out the cookies and milk and get to bed so that Santa could work his magic shimmying down our chimneys.”

“The blaring sirens and amplified, ‘Ho Ho Hos’ are crystalized in the warm breath smoke that met the chill of the cold December night,” she continued, “and are seared into the best part of my core memories.”

The traditions continued as the Grosso siblings grew older, both married, and they had their own children. Doane and Tony took over the holidays and incorporated some newer traditions from their spouses’ families with their own classic magic.

“After my dad passed away three years ago, the memories I made with him every December 24th still live on in my heart, and I carry on his legacy as I lay out my own Feast of the Seven Fishes that are speckled with his traditions and recipes,” said Doane. “It made me realize that traditions are really just warm hugs that wrap their arms around you, even when people are long gone.”



Circa 1960 and 1970, Carolyn Young Spoto recalls the pizzazz of holiday shopping in a bustling downtown Passaic.

Carolyn Young Spoto

Christmas shopping in Passaic and walking around with the big shopping bags from McCormys are great memories. There was also donating money in the fireman boot in front of Ginsburg and sometimes shopping in the snow.



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Some residents and staff of the new Murray House in Clifton on Nov. 14. The Murray House, established by the Diocese of Paterson in 1971 as part of its Department of Special Education, is New Jersey's first group home for adults. Below, that's Bishop Lawrence Casey and Father John Wehrle, pastor of St. Phillips Church, with a DDP student

The Joy of Being Home for The Holidays

By Ariana Puzzo

There's no place like home for the holidays. That's true year-round for residents who benefit from the compassionate and joyful services of the Murray House.

On Nov. 14, diocesan and community leaders, residents, staff, and family members gathered for a blessing and ribbon-cutting celebration of the new Murray House in Clifton. The blessing was led by Bishop Kevin J. Sweeney of the Diocese of Paterson.

Hazel Yaptangco, the Development Director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Paterson, is excited about the "new chapter" in the Murray House's highly-respected history.

"We're so proud that The Murray House is ... still able to serve people with disabilities ... [and ensure that] our group homes will be a safe place," said Yaptangco. "This is a very special thing for us. The community has come to love [our residents] as well as they age safely in place."



In 1971, the Department of Persons with Disabilities opened the Murray House in Paterson. The 10-person house would become a wonderful success. Learn more about the Murray House and Catholic Charities at ccpaterson.org/murray-house.

Named for Jimmie Murray, who had a developmental disability and died in 1969, the Murray House was the first group home in New Jersey for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

By 1992, the Murray House relocated to Allwood Pl. and has become the longest existing group home in New Jersey.

In 2024, the Murray House had five residents who were all aged 21 or older. The DPD provided 1,808 days of care to residents living with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and any with dual diagnoses.

"We're at the forefront," said Dennis Murray, vice president of the Board of Trustees for Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Paterson, whose older brother was Jimmie.




Namesake Jimmie Murray (at left), and his brothers Patrick and Dennis Murray with Bishop Kevin J. Sweeney at the opening.



Yaptangco agreed separately, stating that the new home will house the same five residents but offer greater accessibility. They'll also "stay in the same Clifton community that they've come to love and be part of." Some of the residents have lived in the Murray House for two decades.

"The people who stay with us, stay with us for as long as they can," said Yaptangco. "They'll continue to be with us for as long as it's right for the level of care that they need."




*Merry Christmas
& Happy Holidays!*

My family and I have been blessed to be involved in Clifton in many ways and it is a tradition I am proud to continue.

Thank You

Mayor Ray Grabowski

It truly is an honor to serve each and everyone of you.





Congresswoman Nellie Pou with DPD Development Director Hazel Yaptangco.

Setting the Standard

Founded by Father John Wehrten, the pastor of St. Philip's Church on Valley Rd. who passed away on July 24, 2022, the Murrays and the DPD have provided services to the Murray House for the past five decades.

Catholic Charities has 10 group homes and one supervised apartment program, with a new group home opening in Morris County next year. Joanna Miller, the Executive Director of the DPD, explained that the new Clifton location was a long-held goal.

"It's a dream that we have had for some time — to relocate the Murray House program to a ranch-style home, a single-story home that is fully accessible," said Miller.

There will be two ramps for the house, allowing anyone using a wheelchair to enter and exit through the front and back of the house.

"It's something that we really wanted to ensure for them," said Yaptangco.

There is also greater accessibility for the showers and kitchen, plus more space to navigate the bathroom and corners.

"Everything is safe for them to be comfortable, and they won't have to navigate stairs in this facility as they are getting older," said Yaptangco. "They are very excited about moving, and they've picked out colors for their bedrooms."

The Murray House has 24/7 staffing and direct support professionals who assist residents with meal preparation, hygiene, and transportation.

Residents often visit the Gruenert Center, the DPD's Adult Day Training program in Lake Hopatcong. The

center supports about 57 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by providing work opportunities, vocational training, and educational opportunities.

Receiving mental, physical, and spiritual enrichment is something that residents also receive daily through the Murray House and Catholic Charities.

Securing Their Future

The new location isn't the only milestone. The DPD is celebrating 60 years of serving clients. First accredited by the Council on Accreditation in 1986, the DPD is the only provider in the intellectual and developmental disabilities field in New Jersey to hold such an accreditation.

That goes a long way with the community. Linda Pope was excited for her sister Janet and other residents to move into their new Clifton home. Janet has lived at Murray House for 11 years.

"I have just watched her blossom and her life change for the better. The Murray House staff is amazing with Janet," said Pope. "They are very loving and help her in so many ways."

"They don't just do everything for her. They really make her responsible," Pope added. "Janet also loves going to the various programs they've set up for her. She calls it her work."

The Murray House is a familial environment at its core and fosters that bond with the mission of ensuring all of its residents are happy, healthy, and well cared for.

"Everyone surrounds them with love, and that translates into self-esteem, their pride, and their ability to realize their hopes and dreams on a daily basis," said Miller.

Scott Milliken, the CEO of Catholic Charities, echoed a similar sentiment that the new Murray House represents more to its occupants and the community than a redesigned home.

"It's a testament to our belief that every person deserves to age with dignity, independence, safety, and comfort," said Milliken. "Murray House has set the standard for compassionate, person-centered care for over five decades. This relocation honors that legacy while securing their future."

For more information about the Murray House, contact Yaptangco by calling 862-408-1498 or emailing hazel@ccpaterson.org.

To volunteer or request information on services and/or occupancy, contact Miller by calling 973-406-1100 or emailing joanna@dpd.org.



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Building UPON A Strong Foundation

By Ariana Puzzo



Opening doors to kids and inspiring future leaders for 78 years is the hallmark of the Boys & Girls Club.

After nearly eight decades, the community's support remains as timeless as it is essential. This year's goal for the 2025-26 Future Ready Annual Campaign is \$100,000, but every dollar helps support programming and a safe environment where kids can thrive and explore their interests. The Annual Campaign, which began in 2005, runs from November to March.

Richard Mariso, the Chair of the Future Ready Campaign, is motivated by how The Club is "just a spectacular place where so many kids come on an annual basis." The Club is currently hosting nearly 1,000 kids in its flagship afterschool enrichment program at its main Club House and at 13 school sites throughout the city.

Mariso, 62, is also motivated by his community. The Dutch Hill resident has lived here for nearly three decades and knows its residents are generous.

"[The community] needs us as a club, and we're there. We've been in Clifton for many years," said Mariso. "And what really motivates me is having a place where kids can go, be safe, and feel really comfortable."



On this page and the ones that follow, we show some of the good things going on at The Club. At right, Campaign Chair Rich and Beverley Mariso with daughters Candace and Monique.

Mariso and his wife, Beverley, are former Club parents. Daughters Monique (CHS 2008) and Candace (CHS 2012) participated in the Seahawks swim program, with Monique becoming Assistant Aquatics Director for four years after she graduated college.

As a Club parent and as a Board member for upwards of 20 years, the needs are evident to Mariso. They need the generous support that can come from individuals, organizations, and corporate partnerships. But, as more families face financial hardships, that door swings both ways.

"We obviously need funds to help run this organization," said Mariso. "But I think a lot of people in our community need our services more than ever."

To support the Annual Campaign or learn other ways to give back, visit bgccclifton.org/donate. Additional questions? Call the Main Clubhouse, 181 Colfax Ave., at 973-773-2697. For news, follow the BGCC on Instagram @bgccclifton or Facebook @BoysGirlsClubOfClifton.



Tapping Into New Potentials

As Mariso tells it, people's generosity goes far. And the numbers support his assertion.

Every \$1 that is invested into Boys & Girls Clubs returns \$10.32 in social and economic benefits to the community. One of the important aspects of The Club's support is its preparation for youth to learn "what their skills

are" and offers a place to develop "what their dreams can possibly be."

Sports are part of it, but The Club has evolved from a place to play soccer or basketball. Last year, The Club built a STEM Lab and hired a STEM coordinator. The program was included in this year's BGCA national study on STEM in youth development afterschool programs.



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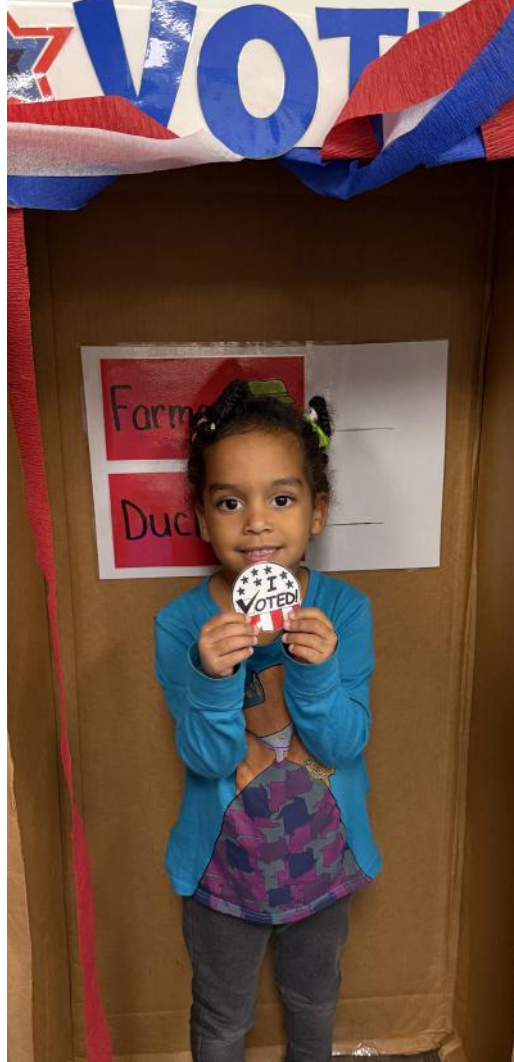


Building Upon A Strong Foundation

The Club's Teen Program, the Keystone Club, also renewed its Charter with BGCS. Teens are learning financial skills first-hand by managing new vending machines and the Kids Café.

The Keystone Kids volunteer throughout the Main Clubhouse and middle school kids have formed several new clubs of their own, including a Fashion Club and a DIY Club.

Mariso explained it's about building life skills. But sports are a major component of The Club kid experience if that's where their interest lies. The Nicholas Martini Aquatics Center offers affordable, high quality swim lessons by well-trained instructors who instruct some 370 swim lessons during weekdays and on Saturdays — or approximately 4,400 annual lessons.



The nationally ranked Seahawks continue to break records and have 106 members. This year, they added a noncompetitive swim team with 20 members that's growing as well.

The Club's Winter Indoor Soccer League has 250 kids signed up on 26 teams, from U7 to U13. The B&G basketball program had 100 kids in clinics or on teams.

The Junior Mustang Football program is run with over 100 kids ages 4 to 6 playing flag football and another 100 kids in cheer.

"There are all sorts of opportunities," said Mariso. "I like the development of The Club and watching it grow into more than a hang-out place. It's a place for kids to build relationships, where they can talk to and see their friends. It's a really peaceful place to be."



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Some of the staff who attended the B&G Club installation luncheon: Natalie Alpizar, Joule Sparrow, Paula Benjamin, Andrea Bracco, Gabe Blau, Roman Chyshkevych, Nadia Stavko, Anna Abakumova, Maura Holden, Maureen Cameron.

Finding New Ways to Grow

Philanthropy is a Fette family tradition, and it is one that spreads joy throughout generations of Cliftonites. It started with the late Henry Fette, who sat on the Boys Club's Board 77 years ago and was one of the earliest leaders of The Club.

That dedication to our city's youth continued with Lawrence and Nancy Fette. Lawrence (CHS 1954) didn't serve on the Board, but he and Nancy were committed financial supporters. She's still supportive during the Annual Campaign and for other events.

Which brings us to the present day. The third and fourth generations include Board member John Fette and wife Kristin, as well as their twin sons Hart and Dan Fette. John Fette, who's spent roughly 20 years on the Board, is its new president. He succeeds Board Chair Katrine Hyde, a long-time trustee who became president in October of 2023.

"I am most proud of the expanded and varied programming that we have developed for all ages, and especially our teens," said Hyde. "Going forward, I am excited to see The Club further build on that with a focus on reaching those youths that need us most, where they need us most."

"We can achieve that with continued support from the community and our donors," she continued, "to whom we are deeply grateful." The Fettes support The Club in many ways, but there was a stand-out moment five years ago.



In November of 2020, John and Kristin (at left on our cover) offered a one-time \$50,000 gift during The Club's "\$200,000 Ask" for the Annual Campaign. Their motivation came from seeing COVID's effect on The Club's income and resources. Serving as a member of the finance committee, Fette and Kristen did their part with a hope that their donation would match other donations, dollar-for-dollar.

The Club's future support appears to be in good hands with sons Hart and Dan. On April 3, The Club honored Fette Auto Group and the Clifton Health Department at its Great Futures Gala. "We are 100% into

The Club and what it does for the community," said Fette, the president of Fette Auto Group. "We're grateful to provide that support."

What's more is Fette's eagerness to hit the ground running as the Board president. He served previously as secretary for two years, next as treasurer, and then as vice president. What he's looking to see in these next few years is strong volunteerism and expansion of services.

That includes bringing in more corporate and private donors, particularly since "expenses keep getting higher and higher. The staff and team do all the hard work, but [The Club is] a great thing for the town and for the businesses," said Fette, 61. "If these kids weren't coming to The Club after and before school, where would they be?"

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Building Upon A Strong Foundation

“Most parents work, both of them, and with the after-school programs, we keep kids off of the streets,” he continued. “We teach them skills.”

Cooking and baking classes are new to The Club’s offerings, and Fette mentioned that there are also discussions about other additions. “Theater is something that I’m looking to support,” he said. “One of my other goals is to get a Club presence in the Botany Village area.”

Amongst the 13 school sites and two new wraparound programs for Pre-K students at Clifton Early Learners Academy at CELA A and CELA B, there are a few classrooms that The Club provides in Botany.

But The Club is also “pretty full” with an already-existing waiting list.

“We really need a spot down in Botany. It’s part of our strategic plan and we thought [it would move forward] a couple of years ago, but then COVID happened,” said Fette. “Hopefully we can get some classes down there for Early Learning programs that right now we bus the kids to.”

Cutting down that need for transportation would be a long-term, money-saving method for The Club. Although Fette recognizes that it is “pretty tight, land-wise” down in Botany and finding a location that fulfills state accessibility requirements would be challenging, he isn’t discouraged.

“We want to keep that momentum going,” said Fette.



The Leaders of Tomorrow

The Club’s strides and any advancements aren’t left up to chance. In fact, there was plenty of intrigue when CEO Gabriel Blau stepped onto the scene in early 2024, following the retirement of Executive Director Bob Foster.

One of Blau’s early efforts was working with The Club’s team of staff, volunteers, and Board members to figure out what teens need from their services on a daily basis.

“We’ve done a lot around The Club in the last two years, and the magic that happens at The Club for thousands of kids is not by accident,” said Blau. “It’s the result of dedicated staff, a supportive community, and an engaged and dedicated board of trustees.”

“None of this would happen without our President and



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Infatuation

Hair Salon



From left, Gabe Blau (CEO) and board members: George Jacobs, Maureen O'Connor, Joe Holmes, Glora Martini, Angelo Crudele, Kate Hyde (Board Chair), John Fette (Board President), Gina Corradino, Michele Chambers (Board Treasurer), James Anzaldi, and 2023 BGCC Youth of the Year, Alias Ragsdale, recently elected to the Clifton Board of Education.

Chair who show up every day in support of our mission,” he added. There was audible relief in Fette’s voice when asked if The Club is feeling the hurt from drying up federal funds or grants.

“Not yet. The Club is still strong. We own the property, which is kind of unusual, and there’s no mortgage or debt on it,” said Fette. “The whole facility is of great value, and we’re pretty solid. The balance sheet is pretty good.”

He went on to say that “most of the grants are from the State”, not the federal government, but he’s still hopeful that grants aren’t cut and remain available to them.

The Club, to that end, is looking to hire a Grant Manager, whose job would be to find grants and opportunities that are available. “We’re concerned about it, but it has not affected any of the services at this point and we will continue to move along,” said Fette. “With a good Board and all of our support, we’ll face that challenge if it comes to us, and hopefully it doesn’t.”

Fette additionally expressed confidence that The Club would hit its “\$100,000 Ask” this year, but he emphasized the importance of both The Club locking down necessary grants and the country as a whole getting behind what the Boys & Girls Clubs all stand for in local communities.

It’s not just their organization either. It’s every organization that sees the needs of others and makes it their mission to fulfill them. “It’s not just us in Clifton or the YMCA in Montclair. It’s all these organizations that rely on these grants and have relied and made investments in their community,” said Fette. “It’s so important that everyone gets behind keeping these grants, whatever they are, to keep them in play.”

“The Club and all of these other organizations around the state and country — we do a lot for children,” he added. “Good kids come out of these programs, and they’re our next leaders.”

See page 53 if you’d like to contribute.



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Corradino & Papa law firm continues to keep the Boys & Girls Club of Clifton a priority. A week before Thanksgiving, they donated 50 turkeys to be distributed by The Club. Seated from left are Maureen Cameron of The Club, RC Papa, Joe DeFuria. Standing from left: Gina Corradino, Nick Schroter, Frank Parisi, Jacek Zapotoczny, The Club's CEO Gabe Blau and Raffaella Selvaggio.



John Fette, second from right with hat, and sons Hart (holding a turkey) and Dan, along with Fette KIA sales team members Malik Thabata, Michael Ferrera and Rami Ziedan, delivered 50 turkeys to The Club and 50 more to Toni's Mission, a ministry of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Montclair.



Your Holiday Gift Can Change a Child's Life!

Each day, hundreds of children and teens step through the doors of the Boys & Girls Club of Clifton. Inside, they're welcomed with warmth—seen, supported, and inspired.

For more than **four generations**, the Club has been a place where confidence is built, character is shaped, and Clifton's young people discover a future filled with possibility.

As we celebrate the season and look ahead to a new year, your gift creates a Great Future for every child. You're helping Club Kids grow stronger, learn more, and step boldly into what's next. Scan the QR code below or visit bgcclifton.org/donate to make your year-end gift today!

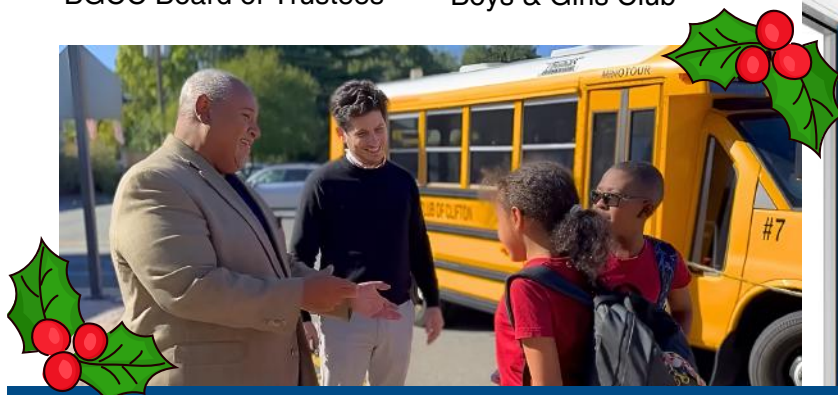
Thank you for sharing the spirit of the season with the Boys & Girls Club of Clifton!

Rich Mariso

Rich Mariso
Chair, Annual Campaign
BGCC Board of Trustees

Gabe Blau

Gabe Blau
Chief Executive Officer
Boys & Girls Club



Boys & Girls Club of Clifton | 822 Clifton Avenue, Clifton, NJ 07013 | 973-773-0966 | www.bgcclifton.org



The Joy of Giving

Clifton FMBA 21 members and Clifton Fire Department are doing their annual toy drive and asking residents to help out. Drop off new toys at all Clifton Fire Stations from Nov. 15 to Dec. 15. Once donated, sorted, wrapped and organized, the toys will bring smiles to kids at the Clifton Boys & Girls Club Christmas Party. Pictured from left: Clifton Fire Inspector Mike Onder, officers Jacob Garcia-Torres, Lt. William Espinoza, Chief Michael Rowan and officer Javier Diaz.



These Thanksgiving turkeys may be grounded, but they're going where they're needed most thanks to the generosity and three-decade old holiday tradition of Craig Chanie.

It was about 30 years ago that he donated his supermarket Thanksgiving reward turkey to a woman at work who had four children. From that simple act of kindness came a tradition, where Chanie increased the amount of turkeys to give away, year-after-year.

For 2025, he topped previous records. "I'm happy to say I filled my truck with 50 to be donated to various charities, including the food bank at St. Agnes in Little Falls," said Chanie, who Cliftonites will remember for his many years at the Clifton Board of Education, managing the bus maintenance department.

"I don't know who gets more joy; me or the people that get these turkeys. Happy Holidays to all."

Turn the page for more turkey news.



When you hear a bell ring, you know an angel received their wings. So when you visit Paulison Ave. Shoprite, and you hear the Salvation Army's bell ring, be an angel and throw some change, cash or check into the red kettle. Donations help serve 450 hot meals per week, prepare 120 emergency food boxes weekly, and fund a sleep-away camp for 20 kids every summer. If you are in need, or want to donate or volunteer, write to christina.ramirez@use.salvationarmy.org. Pictured from left are the Army's Envoy Chris Amaro, volunteer ringer Juanita Mercado, along with Daniel Bush and Penelope Surgent, as well as Felix Diaz doing his part to help. Amaro manages the Mission House at 550 Main Ave., Passaic, NJ 07055 if you'd like to send a check.



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There are many ways to support the good work of St. Peter's Haven. From participating or sponsoring the Bloomin' 5K and 1 mile Walk on April 26, 2026 to the September Tricky Tray and donations and other forms of support year-round, The Haven does a lot with a small team. Above are some of the folks from St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church who turned out to the sold-out third Empty Bowls on Nov. 14. The Athenia Veterans Post donated the space and samples of soups, chili and bread and pastries from area restaurants. Ticket holders received a handcrafted potters bowl and lots of good good within it. From left: Helen Fedoriw, Marion Hrubec, Liz Loden, Sister Kathleen Hutsko, Sister Tekla Gnatyuk, Mary Vatasin, Sister Cecelia Sworin, and Irene Kulyk.

Send some joy to those helping others by volunteering or sending items or a donation. Here are a few charities serving our hometown....

St. Peter's Haven strives to close the hunger gap with every donation that comes its way. But did you know that nearly 1.1 million New Jerseyans are food insecure? Providing pantry donations is always appreciated, but the non-profit can do more with your dollars. Send your checks to: St. Peter's Haven, 380 Clifton Avenue, Clifton, NJ 07011. Donate online at: saintpetershaven.org.

The Clifton Little Free Pantry Program proves that even the smallest act of kindness can have a ripple effect. Drop-off at: Allwood Library, City Hall, JK Realty, and 57 Dalewood Rd. Want to host a food drive for the Little Free Pantry? Email: CliftonLittleFreePantries@gmail.com.

The Clifton Unhoused Initiative is always needs donations and support. Go to cliftonunhousedinitiative.org or follow "Clifton Unhoused Initiative" on Facebook for the latest updates. To reach out: write or call Margaret Curreri: clifton.unhoused.initiative@gmail.com or 973-317-8722.



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The Salvation Army feeds an average of 156,000 each day in the U.S. and offers year-long programs. The Passaic branch provides: Worship Services and Sunday School, a Soup Kitchen, Women's Ministries, Men's Ministries, a Food Pantry, Prayer and Bible Study, and Youth Programs. Need support? Call 973-779-1155 or 973-745-0152. Visit easternusa.salvationarmy.org/new-jersey/passaic.

Strobes Outreach for Kingdom Kids is dedicated to providing a permanent, loving home and life-changing support for children and youth in need. The 501(c)(3) nonprofit serves those who were abused, neglected, or abandoned, as well as those who are aging out of foster care. Donations can be made online at strobesoutreachforkingdomkids.com. Call 973-495-1433 or email info@MOFFKK.com.

Knights of Columbus Regina Mundi Council 3969 is a Roman Catholic ministry since 1955. Meetings are held at St. Andrew the Apostle Church, 400 Mt Prospect Ave., with Dr. Rodulfo P. Moises, Jr. presiding as the Grand Knight. Call 973-248-7731 or email form at kofcreginamundi.org. Join the Facebook group "Knights of Columbus, Regina Mundi Council #3969, Clifton, NJ" for event updates.

Relay For Life of Clifton and Rutherford is June 6, 2026. Join the fight against cancer through fundraising then in the relay, which will be held at Clifton Stadium, 350 Piaget Ave., starting at 5 pm. Each dollar makes a difference and this year's goal is \$65,000. To donate or be a sponsor, visit relayforlife.org/crnj. Questions? Contact Halle Baker at 732-852-4068 or halle.baker@cancer.org. More updates on Facebook at "Relay For Life of Clifton and Rutherford".

Clifton Against Substance Abuse (CASA) welcomes volunteers from the business, governmental, and educational communities. CASA receives its grant funding from the City of Clifton and the Governor's Council Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse, but all are encouraged to get involved. Email President Thomas Whittles at twhittles@yahoo.com or call 862-686-3112.





2025 HOLIDAY EVENTS

<p>• DEC 14TH SUN</p> <p>SANTA BRUNCH & TOY DRIVE 11am - 2:30pm Benefiting St. Peter's Haven <i>Donations Accepted starting December 1st</i></p>	<p>• DEC 25TH THU</p> <p>CHRISTMAS DAY Closed</p>	 THEBARROWHOUSE.COM SCAN HERE TO CHECK OUT OUR OTHER HOLIDAY EVENTS!
<p>• DEC 24TH WED</p> <p>CHRISTMAS EVE Lunch 12pm - 3:30pm Dinner 4pm - 7pm <i>Featuring Regular Menu Items & Specials</i></p>	<p>• DEC 31ST WED</p> <p>NEW YEARS EVE Featuring Regular Items & Specials <i>Bar open late</i></p>	
<p>• JAN 1ST THU</p> <p>NEW YEARS DAY Brunch 11am - 3:30pm Dinner 4pm - 10pm</p>	<p>• JAN 1ST THU</p> <p>NEW YEARS DAY Brunch 11am - 3:30pm Dinner 4pm - 10pm</p>	

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Code Blue is underway and to help those in need combat the cold, Clifton FMBA 21 members and the Clifton Fire Department collected over 150 coats for folks of all sizes. They are seen at St. Peter's Haven with staff sorting the items.

Clifton Public Library offers museum passes, research databases, computer use, homebound services, and more. The Main Library is at 292 Piaget Ave., and the Allwood Branch, 44 Lyall Rd. In October, 30,160 cardholders included 20,771 adults, 4,692 young adults, and 4,697 juveniles. In 2024, the Library circulated 424,917 items. To support, visit cliftonpl.org/give-to-the-library and mail a check to: 292 Piaget Ave., Clifton, NJ 07011 or bring it to the circulation desk. Questions? Contact Christine Althawabta at 973-772-5500 or althawabta@cliftonpl.org.

Theater League of Clifton is in its 20th year and is doing dimmer theater, big showcases on stage and continues to nurture theater arts in our youth with scholarships for CHS seniors. To donate, be a sponsor, or buy an ad in TLC's next Playbill, visit theaterleagueofclifton.com.

Clifton Arts Center and Kismet Performing Artists have teamed up for four joint fundraisers since Kismet was formed in 2020. The theater company is built and inspired by artists to cultivate a broader appreciation of the world. Donat3: kismetperformingartiststheatre.wordpress.com.

The North Jersey Elks Developmental Disabilities Agency has helped enrich the quality of life for individuals with disabilities for over 75 years. NJEDDA offer special education programs for students in preschool through age 21. Therapy services include physical, occupational, and speech and language therapy, plus assistive technology. Contributors can make a monetary donation online or donate their car, boat, or RV. Visit njedda.org and select the "Support Us" drop-down menu option. Interested in becoming a corporate sponsor, making matching contributions, or arranging planned giving? Call 973-772-2600.

Clifton Education Foundation provides grants for innovative and everyday programs and projects not typically supported in the BOE budget. To support these efforts, visit cliftoneducationfoundation.org or mail donations to: CEF, P.O. Box 2071, Clifton, NJ 07015. Follow on Instagram and Facebook @cliftoneducationfoundation.

Clifton PRAISE (Parents Requiring Action and Information for Special Education) is a resource for parents and families of special needs children and adults. Meetings are every fourth Monday and programs include Bambino Buddy Ball baseball for kids 5-20 and a Special Olympics bowling team. Join the Facebook group "Clifton P.R.A.I.S.E." for resources. To donate via PayPal or Venmo, or to volunteer, visit cliftonpraise.org or email cliftonpraise@gmail.com.

Clifton's Avenue of Flags salutes veterans with 2,287 displays of patriotism five times per year. On patriotic days, volunteers erect flags through lanes on the city hall campus. To volunteer, call 973-365-2630 or Marie Schultheis at 973-563-3249. To honor a Clifton veteran by purchasing a flag, fill out an application and mail it in with a \$120 check and proof of veteran's service. Get an application: cliftonnj.org/222/Avenue-of-Flags. The next patriotic day is Memorial Day, May 25, 2026, then Flag Day.

Councilwoman Rosemary Pino's non-partisan effort addresses access and opportunities to individuals who may find themselves stuck in the cycles of poverty, abuse, or hopelessness. The organization rallies resources and welcomes support from the community. To join the movement, visit teampino.us. Questions? Write info@teampino.us. Mailing address: 1068 Main Ave. Clifton, NJ 07011. Follow PINO on Instagram @pinomovement_us.

Clifton Firefighters Local 21

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Clifton Firefighters are looking for donations of new unwrapped toys for boys and girls of all ages this holiday season to be dropped off at any of the city's fire stations



Please drop off before Dec. 15!

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Clifton, NJ 07011

Clifton Fire Station 2
7 Dumont Avenue
Clifton, NJ 07013

Clifton Fire Station 3
180 Mahar Avenue
Clifton, NJ 07011

Clifton Fire Station 4
144 Main Avenue
Clifton, NJ 07014

Clifton Fire Station 5
51 Brighton Road
Clifton, NJ 07012

Clifton Fire Station 6
1202 Van Houten Avenue
Clifton, NJ 07013

Clifton FMBA Local 21 219 Valley Road, Clifton, NJ 07013

Contact: FF Laurion 973-296-2070 & LT Espinoza 201-988-4195 Email: Info@CliftonFMBA21.org

www.Facebook.com/CliftonFMBA21.org



The Young Israel of Passaic-Clifton, on Brook Ave., is led by Rabbi Yaakov Glasser. Youth advocating for Palestinian rights at the Palestinian American Community Center, which is on Lakeview Ave.

The Islamic Center of Passaic County offers educational courses, storytime, counseling, sports, and various community resources. Established in 1990, the first ICPC mosque opened on Getty Ave., Paterson, just off Crooks Ave., where it still serves the community. In 2016, ICPC opened a second house of worship with a community center at 259 Pershing Rd., Clifton. Questions? Contact: info@icpcnj.org or 973-278-7070. To donate to Afghanistan Earthquake Relief and/or Pakistan Flood Relief, visit icpcnj.org.

The Palestinian American Community Center's Gaza Relief Drive is postponed until a new transport partner is secured, but supporting the organization's core mission and those who are in need is possible in other ways. To support daily operations and resources for the community, make a donation online at paccusa.org/donate. Questions? Call 973-253-6145 or email info@paccusa.org. Mailing address: 388 Lakeview Ave., Clifton, NJ 07011.

The Young Israel of Passaic-Clifton has opened its doors to new and long-time community members for over 50 years. The Orthodox Jewish synagogue welcomes people devoted to Torah, Tefillah, Chesed, and those who value diversity. YIPC, at 200 Brook Ave., Passaic, is led by Rabbi Yaakov Glasser. Under his leadership, the congregation fosters a welcoming environment for individuals and families. The YIPC has daily Minyanim, Shirim throughout the week, a youth department (including Shabbos morning groups), and programming for families. Donations can be made online at: yipc.org.

Faith and culture is celebrated in its many forms throughout the city, where residents can pray for peace and offer support to those in need. Here are a few more:

Holy Assumption, 35 Orange Ave., is Russian Orthodox, part of the Diocese of New York & New Jersey of the Orthodox Church in America. Construction of the onion-shaped dome was completed in the summer of 1936 and it remains a beacon and landmark in Athenia. With regular services, often in Slavonic and English, the parish hosts an annual picnic in October and other events, year-round. There is a community center open for rentals. To help support the parish, the congregation sells pirogis and other food. Visit holyassumptionclifton.org/donate.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Holy Ascension Cathedral, 635 Broad St., has a landmark cupola that can be seen from Clifton and by drivers on the Parkway. Known for its wonderful Ukrainian festival held every September on the large lawn behind the house of worship, the church is busy year-round. Led by Fr. Oleksii Holchuk, the congregation has done much outreach regarding the church's activities and particularly concerning the war in Ukraine. Services are often in Ukrainian, and there are Sunday School programs, special events, and a call for parishioners and the community to support humanitarian aid for Ukrainians. To support Ukraine and support the Holy Ascension Church in Clifton, donations can be made online at ukrcoc.org/donate-2. There are other ways to support Ukraine and embrace heritage locally as well.

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From Acquackanonk GARDENS



By Douglas John Bowen

Don't fall for the Hallmark Channel's various explanations of where Santa Claus lives and works. He can be found right here in Acquackanonk Gardens — at least when he's not making his globetrotting journey on Christmas Eve, which begins with the 55th Annual Tour De Clifton on Dec. 24.

From 3 to 9 pm, Santa does his tour, escorted by the wailing sirens of firetrucks and patrol cars, which can change by neighborhood. But you can't miss Santa: he'll be perched on a parade float tossing candies, waving to the kids, and visiting every street in our fair community.

And much like Superman has an everyday cover identity as Clark Kent, the real Santa, most days, poses as life-long, hard-working and jolly Cliftonite Patrick M. Doremus, a 58-year-old veteran employee of the Clifton Department of Public Works.

Santa — aka Patrick to unsuspecting neighbors, colleagues, and townsfolk — calls Acquackanonk Gardens home along with his wife, Lee Ann, and their sons, Patrick Jr. (CHS 2017), and David (CHS 2023).

Lee Ann was born in Acquackanonk Gardens, nestled near the sloping hills of

Valley Rd., just off of Van Houten Ave., and has lived virtually her whole life there, save for a few brief months.

Her late mother, Arlene Bross, lived immediately next door.

Lee Ann's husband, by contrast, spent his early life in Delawanna, or "the wrong side of the tracks," more than one family member asserted with a smile.

In short, it's a convincing cover story, complete with official Clifton records and not a single verbal slip from any of the Doremus family.

And to be sure, on a visit once to Van Wagoner Ave., Santa's sleigh and reindeer and a few more elves were hidden from sight amidst several functioning sheds and tool houses.

Meanwhile, something akin to a thinly disguised runway in Acquackanonk Park blended into autumn invisibility amidst the adjacent baseball field, basketball court, and toddlers playground.

The ruse was nearly perfect.

But Publisher Tom Hawrylko, with amazingly quick camera re-





The Santa tour began thanks to Tom Insinga and Mike Novack, pictured with Paul Graupe and Chuck Ranges.

flexes, captured Santa/Patrick and some helpers running through an early dress rehearsal in 2020 — undoubtedly part of Santa’s annual preparation schedule during an otherwise unusual year.

Caught on camera, Santa disappeared in the legendary blink of an eye. He shortly reappeared as Patrick Doremus in civilian clothes, and modestly — but merrily — consented to a living room interview. A steady, almost magically consistent fire in the real fireplace, fueled by ash wood, lent a holiday atmosphere to the discussion.

Even before Santa was asked his first question, he fired

off one of his own, inquiring if Hawrylko had brought his Christmas wish list. Then, with a laugh, he warned that the publisher had better behave.

“I’ll be watching you,” he said as Hawrylko departed.

Canvassing Clifton

“So when did you know you were Santa Claus?” the visitor had inquired. “I was walking through Clifton City Hall in November, 2014,” Santa recalled. “Mayor James Anzaldi walked out of his office. He looked me up and down and said, ‘You would fit.’”





“Fit for what?” I asked,” Santa said. “‘We’re looking for Santa,’ the mayor replied. ‘There already is a Santa,’ I protested,” Santa recounted to his guest. But he also told the mayor, “‘If you’re in a jam, I’ll take the job.’ The mayor told me to call home and ask my wife.”

Mrs. Claus (Lee Ann) was enthusiastic.

“I was all for it, 100%. It was perfect for my husband,” she said. Mrs. Claus also provided a transitional bridge. “I went to school with Tom Insinga’s daughter, Karen,” she noted, allowing Cliftonites to connect the dots involving 50 years of city holiday tradition, founded by Insinga and Mike Novack in 1971.

But if the offer was “perfect”, it was also short notice, giving Santa only one month to prepare for the 45th annual Christmas Eve tour. Still, Santa was ready in time, fitting his Clifton appearance into his global schedule, ready to carry on Clifton tradition.

Each year, Santa appears on his float, provided by Bond Parade Floats & Displays Co. A police car leads the procession, generally followed by a fire truck sounding



In 2015, Santa with navigator David Doremus. At left to-day, Patrick Jr., David and Lee Ann Doremus with Santa.

its siren and a well-amplified, trademark Santa “Ho, ho, ho” coming from the float’s sound system, alerting all to Santa’s approach.

In 2014, his rookie tour: “I suited up around 3 pm, and we got started at roughly 4. That got me back to the house at about 11 o’clock,” he said. “I just covered the whole town. We first covered the lower side of the city, then stopped at City Hall to drop off anyone who needed to leave, and then continued on. In a nutshell, they put me on the float, told me to hold on, and I had to say, ‘Merry Christmas.’ I can do that,” he said.

Son Patrick Jr. accompanied his dad for the entire trip, training for the future.

“I had a blast,” Patrick Jr. said. Added his dad, “He waved to everyone for the entire trip, just as I did. But he wasn’t ready to bellow ‘Merry Christmas’ just yet.”

For the most part, Mrs. Claus kept the home fires burning with son David.

“I did follow the float for a little while, because Patrick Jr.’s girlfriend wanted to hop on the float,” Lee Ann said. “I was there at the city garage, making sure all was well, but once the float left, I came home.”

Given Santa's grueling schedule, many have asked if even Santa gets to take a break. The answer: Bathroom breaks are scheduled. "But they don't feed Santa," Santa said, patting his generous belly gently.

His visitor expressed sincere annoyance at this slight. Santa just smiled. "You do get a little tired," Santa resumed. "But the wear on your voice is the main concern. Still, I made it all the way through the city and the evening saying my signature line, 'Merry Christmas to all and to all, a good night,'" acknowledging one of Santa's early speechwriters, Clement Clark Moore.

Strong family ties

Santa acknowledged his support staff, especially his wife. "There aren't too many people who would let him do this — except Mrs. Claus," he said, beaming. "It's an honor to be asked, since my father was Santa, so it really is a family tradition, pretty much."

Mrs. Claus, aka Lee Ann Doremus, affirmed with pride that the spirit of Santa has been an important touchstone through family generations, on both a large level and, even more significantly, in more intimate family terms.



Eugene Doremus, Patrick's father.

"Patrick's dad, Eugene, was an extremely important person in his life," Mrs. Claus said. "He lost his dad in October, 2014. Mayor Anzaldi approached Patrick about being Santa in November. It was only six weeks after Eugene died."

"For the last three or four months of his dad's life, Patrick took care of him," she continued. "He pretty much moved back home during those months, slept there most nights, helped with doctors, feeding, bathing, taking him outside, out for drives. Everything and anything that his dad needed, Patrick was there."

"One story I will never forget," she recalled. "Patrick's father's license was set to expire. Even though we all knew he would never drive again, he insisted

on getting his license renewed. Patrick planned the whole trip all the way down to calling DMV in Wallington so he can get his dad in quickly for his picture. That happened exactly one week before he died."

"Patrick is a rare breed. I'm not sure how he was able to be Santa so soon after all of that, but I have to say, they couldn't have picked a more perfect person," Mrs. Claus said. Indeed.



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Coping with an injury

Santa Claus is a hard working fellow both on Dec. 24 and during the other 364 days of a given year. While he may not be a mere mortal, even he is not immune from accidents or injury.

“Years ago — I can’t remember exactly, but at least a decade ago — a bunch of platform tables fell on me, roughly 500 pounds of weight,” Santa recalled in 2020.

The incident, occurring at the Clifton Rec Center, seriously injured his left leg, resulting in a trip to the hospital, extensive physical therapy, and “five-and-a-half months out of work,” he said. “I had to learn to reuse my leg. I wasn’t able to move. I was worried that I wouldn’t walk.”

The injury lingered, though Santa has made it a point to stay on his feet while visiting every Clifton neighborhood. “Every once in a while I have a shooting pain,” he observed, and the leg “will buckle on occasion. It gets tired. Just fatigue, that’s all. You have to overcome [it].”

Santa spurns any pharmaceutical assistance to deal with the injury, but, with a laugh, he allowed, “Milk and cookies go a long way.”

Milk and cookies are part of the formula for Santa’s



While Councilman Tony Latona will be navigating, Cindi Wilk and George Spies are on the Elf Squad, Shift 2.

ongoing appearances and rock star status, even as his Clifton audience changes over the decades. In 2019, families poured out of their homes despite persistent rainy weather that would have dampened the spirits of most on any other day. Santa has a knack for bringing out the best of anyone, even when the weather doesn’t cooperate.

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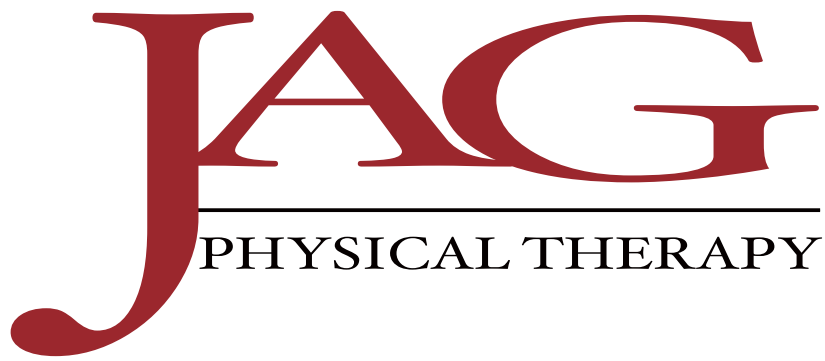
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“The response was great, really good,” Santa reported. “People in every neighborhood, people from many different walks of life, they all were laughing, smiling, bringing their children along, holding them up for a better view, just having a good time.”

Both Santa and son Patrick Jr. note the upbeat response included those who might not celebrate Christmas within their homes. “There were no bad vibes,” Santa said. “The Christmas spirit is something anyone can understand, regardless of a personal conviction.”

Different neighborhoods posed different challenges. As one example: Down in Botany Village, amidst narrow streets and tight corners, at one point “we got stuck. So we got off the float while people worked to get us back on the road, and we started talking to all the children and people there, meeting as many people as we could. Everyone had a great time,” Santa said.

“They hit every neighborhood, even if they can’t hit every street,” added Mrs. Claus. Son Patrick Jr. chimed in, “We didn’t miss much.”

Ready for action again

A month after landing the job, and only two months after his father died, what was the end result of a hard evening’s work?

“The mayor was pleased,” Santa said. “After we were done, he said, ‘Thank you’, and he said I had the job for the next 40 years, if I wanted it. I was exhausted,” Santa added, almost as an afterthought. “But I’m ready again for this year.”

Santa, of course, had a whole globe to travel before a very well-deserved nap. “My son David tried to wake us up at 6 am Christmas morning,” he said, and both Santa and son Patrick Jr. slowly sprung into action.

Said Mrs. Claus, laughing, “He’s gotta get up. That’s the payback for staying up late all night. His own kids have to get their own presents.”

Mrs. Claus said Santa can handle the schedule. “He’s got a very high energy level. He’s like that every day,” she said. If that energy level ever flags, Patrick Jr. is ready to carry on the family tradition for future generations of Santa seekers.

Patrick Jr. a few years back was a volunteer with the Woodland Park Fire Department, ostensibly training to become a firefighter. He also planned to study to qualify as



Lizz Bumbera Gagnon Recalls:

I rode the Santa sleigh for 10-plus years as Mrs. Claus. This will be the first year that I won’t be on it since my last run was last Christmas Eve. There are many good memories — the rain, the snow, Frank Gaccione driving and hitting low branches, which caused the sign to be seared off. I always had a great time even though it was cold because it makes the residents’ Christmas Eve special. My fondest memory was looking up and seeing elderly senior citizens waving from their bedroom windows. The smiles on their faces made the whole trip worth it.

an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). Either or both would provide a convenient cover story, beyond gainful employment, to obscure one’s true identity if one’s future includes piloting a sleigh around the world.

Asked about the possibility of a future succession of Santas, Patrick Jr. answers politely, if a bit evasively, “I’ll do the job in the future, if I’m asked.”

For now, though, Santa — again, under the moniker Patrick M. Doremus — has the situation well in hand, aided by family and by the hardworking crew of elves from City Hall, Clifton Fire Department, and Bond Parade Float Co., among other contributors.

But he did express concern about Santa’s meaning and standing, as sometimes shaped by forces beyond even his control.

“I just read in the paper it will cost \$50 at Macy’s just to sit with Santa,” he said, shaking his head at the concept, unhappy about how it might reflect on the spirit of the holiday.

What advice might he have for “other” Santas, the stand-ins, positioned on a street corner or on their own floats in cities and towns across America?

“Just be jolly,” Santa said. And to all, a good night.

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Meet Santa & His Elves

Candyland is Dec. 13, 5-8 pm on the city hall campus, 900 Clifton Ave. Costumed characters, train rides, candy cane hunts, a Santa visit, letters to Santa, crafts, games, and much more fun is offered for the family. This event is sponsored in part by JK Realty. Pre-registration fee: \$8; day off tickets are \$12. Registration tent opens at 4:30 pm. Attendees ages 3 and up must purchase a ticket. Online registration closes Dec. 11 at cliftonrec.com. For info, call 973-470-5956. FMBA 21 and the Power of One will collect coats and new toys for those in need. Call the Rec Weather Hotline at 973-470-5680 for any changes.



A look back to the elves seen at Candyland in 2018. This year the event is on Dec. 13 on the city hall campus. Candyland is sponsored by the green team of JK Realty.

Clifton Dems Holiday Joy: The Party has a lot to be grateful for so gather friends to enjoy a buffet, beverage and share some provocative conversation. The Clifton Democratic County Committee and the Clifton Democratic Club invite you to the holiday party on Dec. 11 at 6:30 pm at Mario's. Cost is \$45. Let City Leader John D. Pogorelec, Jr., Esq., know you are coming: RSVP: 973-493-0508.

Athenia Business Association's Christmas Tree Lighting is Dec. 6 at Stanley Zwier Park, Van Houten and Huron Ave. Meet Santa and Mrs. Claus, join in the sing-a-long at 5:30 pm, as a prelude to the tree lighting at 5:45 pm. For more info, call 973-202-8578 or 201-410-1686.

The 20th Botany Village Christmas Tree Lighting is Dec. 5 from 6-9 pm in Sullivan Square. Free pictures with Santa and other characters, plus free gifts, free cookies and milk, and free face painting. Donations are appreciated. Questions? Call Joe Waninger at 856-900-2200 or write CHBD President Margaret Kardasz at gosiaa1723@gmail.com.

School 11 HSA Tree Lighting is Dec. 5 at 5 pm on the corner of Lakeview and Merselis Ave. The Mustang Mad Caps perform as you get a photo with Santa and a free Christmas ornament. Hot chocolate is \$1 and the bake sale supports School 11. Email schoolhsa11@gmail.com.

The City's Christmas Tree Lighting is Dec. 7 at 5 pm at City Hall, 900 Clifton Ave. Join Santa and your neighbors for festive songs-a-singing with CHS Mad Caps and the Brass Ensemble as they perform holiday favorites.

Santa Claus sent an email and said he is stopping at 221 Van Houten Ave on Dec. 7, from 11 am to 1 pm. The folks at Gild Realty learned of the news and have hired a photographer to take portraits with the Jolly Guy and visiting kids, pets and adults. Once the photo is taken, Gild will email the photo to you in time for Christmas. There is no charge but to attend, RSVP and ASAP to the office: 973-333-2959.

Clifton Rec's Holiday Door Decorating Contest is open to all residents. Register by Dec. 5 at 4 pm. The judging period begins Dec. 8 and continues throughout the week. Required pre-registration is available on cliftonrec.com or by calling the Rec Department's office at 973-470-5956.

The Homeless Animal Adoption League's Pet Photos with Santa is Dec. 6, noon to 4 pm at 236 Delawanna Ave. Dogs must be on leashes, and all cats and small animals must be in carriers. Cost \$10 for a 4x6 photo card and a digital copy. Refreshments available for an additional donation. RSVPs not required but appreciated. For more info, visit facebook.com/events/1531661364826773.

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Meet Santa & His Elves

School 8 PTO's Breakfast with Santa is Dec. 7 at Applebee's on Rt. 3, 8-10 am. Tickets are \$12 and includes pancakes, sausage, and scrambled eggs, plus a photo with Santa. For more info, write school8pto@gmail.com. To purchase tickets: zeffy.com/en-US/ticketing/school-8-ptobreakfast-with-santa. Deadline is Dec. 5.

Clifton's Holiday Food Drive is accepting donations through Dec. 8 of unexpired and non-perishable food for Clifton families. Deliver donations to the Health Department, second floor, city hall, 900 Clifton Ave. For more info, contact Jennifer Kidd at 973-470-5774.

Join the Boys & Girls Club of Clifton for Holiday Bingo on Dec. 10 from 7-10 pm. Doors open at 5 pm at the Main Clubhouse, 181 Colfax Ave., with an Ugly Sweater Contest and a guaranteed \$3,000 payout. Lots of keepers, handheld computers, and a 50-50 raffle.

CHS HSA presents The Grinch Movie Night on Dec. 12 from 6-9 pm. The movie begins at 6:45 pm. \$5 tickets include activities and must be purchased in advance. Pajamas welcome. Snacks and hot chocolate available for purchase. Tickets: my.cheddarup.com/c/the-grinch-movie-night-ticket-2024-copy/items.

School 5 HASA Breakfast with the Grinch is Dec. 13 at Maple Valley Middle School, 775 Valley Rd. Breakfast is 10 am and vendors will be there 11 am to 2 pm. For vendor sign-up, write: Jbebel8@gmail.com. Get a photo with the Grinch! Tickets: \$12 (breakfast only). Buy tickets online at: bit.ly/47S7XPL. Info? School5hasa@gmail.com.

VFW 7165's Toy Drive runs until Dec. 14 with daily drop-offs at 491 Valley Rd. from 2-8 pm. All toys will be donated to St. Joseph's Children's Hospital in Paterson.

One More Once Big Band's Holiday Show is Dec. 7, 1:30 pm at CCMS, 350 Piaget Ave. Free to Clifton students and kids under 10, tickets are \$15 with 20% donated to the Music Angels Program of Clifton, to help provide affordable rental instruments to Mustang musicians of all ages. An opening set by the CCMS Jazz Band and CCMS Alumni is under the direction of Tim Hayward. CHS and WWMS Jazz Bands will also perform. Questions? Write Joe Verderese (CHS 1999) at onemoreoncebigband@gmail.com.

The Boys & Girls Club's Breakfast with Santa is Dec. 13 at 9:30 am. Tickets: \$15, free for kids 3 and under, which includes breakfast, photos with Santa, arts and crafts, and games. Parents and guardians must have their own camera.



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A Keeper of Memory, *By Valentyna Lazirko* A Builder of Legacy.



At St. Mary Protectress Ukrainian Orthodox Church, from left: Bohdan Muzhychak, Volodymyr Kryzhanovsky, Volodymyr Rybalt, Mike Glova, Olha Kysliak, Mike Yurcheniuk, Father Yaroslav, Edik Korostil, Olena Myer, Nadiya Arkhipova and Valentyna Lazirko.

As a keeper of memory, a builder of legacy, Mike Yurcheniuk is more than a Vietnam War veteran. His life's story is one of an immigrant, born in June 1945 in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp near Munich, Germany. His father, Mykyta, was once a prisoner of war under the Polish Army and his mother, Sophia, was taken from Ukraine and forced to work in a German factory during the war.

But let's start from the beginning.

Europe was in ruins after World War II ended, but Mykyta found work in France and Belgium to support the family, doing whatever he could to keep them afloat.

In 1949, after Yurcheniuk's younger brother Walter was born, the family made a bold move. They left the displaced persons camp and headed for New York, joining friends who had already made the move. It was the start of a new life and, for Yurcheniuk, the beginning of a journey that would take him halfway around the world, as he served the US Navy, from 1965 to 1969 and then returned to Clifton.

Planting Roots

Yurcheniuk fit in easily with American culture, attending school in Passaic and later Clifton. But at home, things were different. Ukrainian was the language of the house, and traditions ran deep. Holidays were celebrated the old way, with embroidered shirts, homemade pierogies, and

the sound of folk songs in the kitchen. On Sundays, they went to a Ukrainian Orthodox church.

It was in 1965 that 11 Ukrainian families, including Yurcheniuk's, built something lasting. They pooled resources and purchased a Lutheran church on the corner of Putnam Pl. and Washington Ave. that they named St. Mary Protectress Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a spiritual anchor for a community determined to preserve its roots while building a new life in the U.S.

Education and service were also part of that new life. After graduating from Drake Business College, everything shifted in 1967 when Yurcheniuk learned that his childhood friend, Bohdan 'Bo' Kowal (CHS 1965), was killed in Vietnam.

That news hit hard, but Yurcheniuk didn't hesitate. He signed up to go. "I flew to Saigon," Yurcheniuk recalled, "with stops in San Francisco, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines." He soon boarded a C-130 transport plane to Vinh Long, in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam.

"After two days, I was taken by a small, high-speed patrol boat, to my ship, the USS Garrett County (LST-786), stationed on the Bassac River," said Yurcheniuk.

The ship served as a mobile patrol base deep in the Mekong Delta. It carried two helicopters and eight PBR boats; small, fast crafts designed for river patrols. At night, the

PBRs would sweep the canals along the Bassac River, watching for Viet Cong movement.

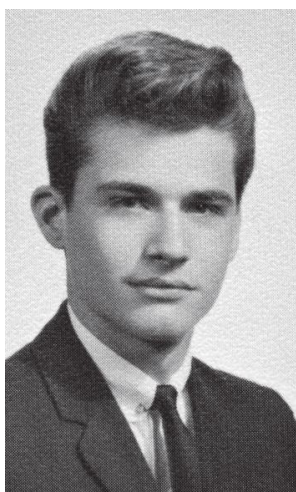
The helicopters were always on standby, ready to provide backup in case of a firefight.

“Being on the river, we were constantly on edge,” said Yurcheniuk. “There was always the risk that sappers could attach mines to the hull or float explosives downriver.” Men were on watch around the clock, shooting at anything suspicious near the ship. They would toss grenades into the water at night just to be safe.

“I remember lying in my bunk and hearing the blast,” he continued. “It sounded like someone hurling a boulder against the side of the ship.”

A New World

Life aboard the ship was simple but strict. And it was always well-organized. “We ran drills constantly,” said Yurcheniuk. “We’d resupply weapons for the PBR boats and reload the helicopters for their next mission.”



Bohdan Kowal and Mike Yurcheniuk

“My post was a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the rear side of the ship,” he added. “When needed, I’d move up to the AK-AK gun at the stern and serve as a pointer.”

In December 1968, the Garrett was sent to dry dock in Guam for repairs, a fresh coat of paint, and to patch up any bullet holes sustained during operations.

While the ship was being serviced, Yurcheniuk and a few other sailors were sent to Leadership School in Yokosuka, Japan. After earning his certification,


he flew back to Guam and, in January 1969, began his return journey to Vietnam, stopping for a week in the Philippines along the way.

There were numerous missions from February to August of 1969, but some of Yurcheniuk’s missions were classified.

When his tour ended, he and several crew members flew out of Saigon, stopping in Japan to refuel, then on to Alaska, before finally landing in San Francisco on Aug. 7, 1969. The service members were transported to Naval

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Station Treasure Island, across the Golden Gate Bridge.

"I spent two weeks there waiting to be discharged and head home," said Yurcheniuk. "We did some sightseeing. Everyone was in bell-bottom jeans, and the streets were full of hippies. It was a whole different world."

Promise For Tomorrow

Like so many veterans, Yurcheniuk left a piece of his youth behind in Vietnam. Friends were lost — some suddenly, others silently — and many would never come home. Over the course of 13 years, the U.S. lost 58,000 service members in Vietnam.

Every year on Veterans Day, Yurcheniuk visits a cemetery in Paterson. He places a small American flag at the grave of childhood friend Kowal, as a simple gesture to ensure that he's never forgotten.

The transition to civilian life wasn't easy. After studying accounting at William Paterson, Yurcheniuk stepped away from school. Through an advertisement in Svoboda, the Ukrainian-language newspaper, he landed a position at the Ukrainian National Association, a fraternal organization that also operated as a life insurance company.

It was more than a job. It kept him connected to his

heritage while building a stable future. He retired after 28 years, but his commitment to the Ukrainian-American community never ended. In 2013, he became a member of St. Mary Protectress Ukrainian Orthodox Church; the same church that his parents helped establish decades earlier. He continued to serve with the same integrity and devotion that defined his time in Vietnam.

His leadership and deep ties to the congregation led to his appointment as Chair of the Church Committee in 2019, a role that he carries with pride and purpose.

Yurcheniuk's story is one of quiet strength, deep loyalty, and unwavering commitment to his country, his heritage, and his community. From the rivers of Vietnam to the heart of Clifton's Ukrainian-American life, he has lived with purpose and humility.

Whether serving his nation during 'Nam or leading his church, Yurcheniuk never sought recognition; only to do what was right. His journey reminds us that service doesn't end with a discharge. It continues in the way that we live, the people that we honor, and the traditions that we carry forward. For Yurcheniuk, it means putting a flag for a fallen friend, preserving the faith of his parents, and showing up year after year for the community that shaped him.

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2025 VETERANS PARADE

Now 99, the Nov. 9 Veterans Parade Grand Marshal Paul Oliver (pictured left) served in the US Navy during WWII and Korea. US Air Force Lt. Col. Michael Gielbeda was the keynote speaker.



Pages of photos follow as the sunny day was indeed picture perfect. While photos are too numerous to add names, we bring your attention to parade organizers siblings Christine and Joe Gaccione, pictured right. Also, at left, give a salute to US Navy Vet Joe Imperato, the hallowed voice of the reviewing stand.



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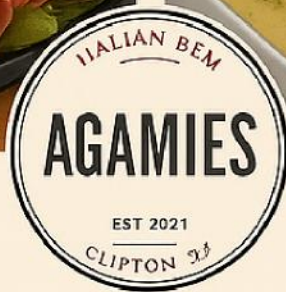
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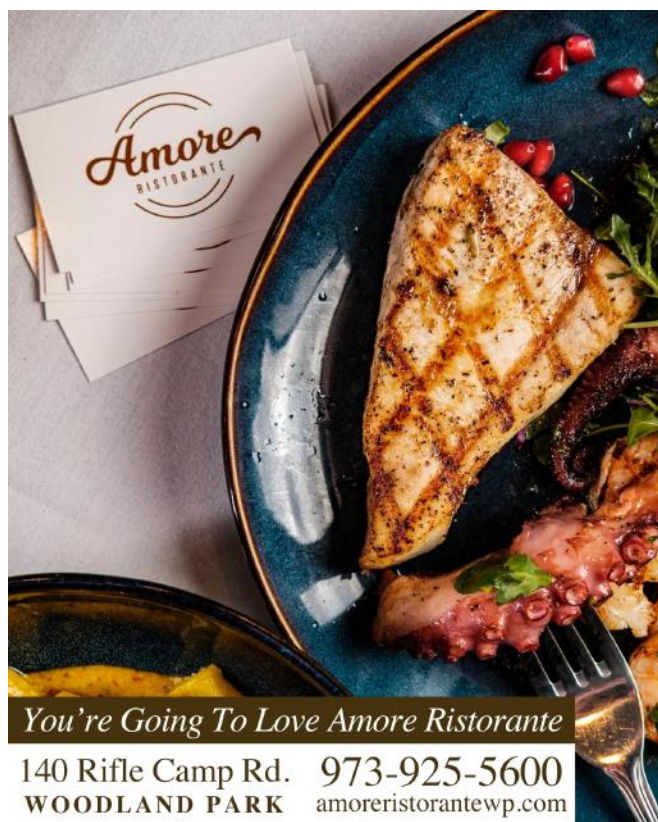
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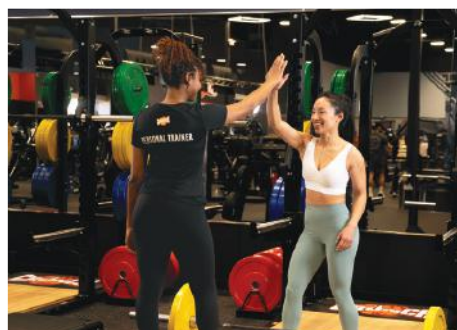
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Mustangs of the Month



Kaitlyn Marte, Stella Martinique, Ryane Juarez, Andi Shaplo.

Here are the **Mustangs of the Month** for December 2025.

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.

Kaitlyn Marte – Freshman

Staying motivated means that Kaitlyn Marte also stays optimistic. Whenever things are tough, she reminds herself that “there are more days to be happy, and all pain is temporary.”

Marte already has a specific vision for those future days. They include earning a college degree in either Special Education or becoming a Veterinarian. Marte is most inspired by the Queen of Tejano Music, the late Selena Quintanilla-Pérez.

“Selena Quintanilla inspired me by showing the passion she had and the hard work she did to achieve her dreams and stay true to herself at a young age,” said Marte (CHS 2029). “This can impact me by motivating me to follow my goals with confidence.”

The most influential teacher that she named is Ms. Elif Inal, a Special Education teacher who works with students with Learning and Language Disabilities at School 12.

“[We] have a great relationship and bond together. She has been a very good teacher to me and her students,” said Marte. “[Ms. Inal] shows that she wants to help her students and wants her students to learn.”

One of Marte’s recent hurdles was “adjusting to [a] new and bigger school”, but she now plays Freshman Volleyball and her favorite class is Stagecraft because “I like art.”

Stella Martinique – Sophomore

Stella Martinique’s greatest inspiration is someone that she’s looked up to since Day 1.

“[My older sister, Elizabeth] has always been there for me and has encouraged me in all my endeavors,” said Martinique (CHS 2028). “She was the one who brought me into the theater program and the violin, both of which I cannot imagine a life without.”

“She has always been like a second mom to me and while, at times, it can get annoying, I wouldn’t trade it for the world,” continued Martinique. “I know that no matter where the world takes us, we will always have each other to rely on.”

Martinique’s favorite subject is math, which she excels in, and her favorite type of math so far is Algebra. She credited that to her “amazing” freshman year teacher Ms. Eftihia Kelso. Martinique also expressed gratitude for Mr. Michael Richter, her seventh grade English teacher at WWMS.

“He gave me a new perspective on writing and helped me a lot in developing my essays,” she said. “In fact, my go-to essay format is the one he taught us.”

Martinique’s extracurriculars include the Fall Play and the Spring Musical, along with Orchestra. Her clubs include Tri-M, Key Club, CSA, Interact Club, and the Drama Club.

Ryane Juarez – Junior

The world is full of endless fascinations, and junior Ryane Juarez gets a firsthand glimpse at some of them when he is learning in the classroom.

“My favorite subject is Biology because of my love for animals,” said Juarez (CHS 2027). “In biology, I get to learn how they live and function.”

Juarez’s future plans involve using his love for computers to pursue a career in the technology field. He would like to become either a technical support specialist or a web developer. Before then, Juarez keeps busy with multiple extracurricular activities.

He is currently in his third year as a member of the Clifton Mustang Marching Band. Juarez is also a member of Tri-M and the CHS Orchestra. A major hurdle that he has had to overcome while adjusting to life at CHS is balancing his time with school and extracurriculars.

There are a few people in his life who provide the necessary support. The first are his parents, who motivate him and inspire him by “how hard they work” to provide for Juarez and his sister. There is also CHS’ Band Director Bryan Stepneski.

“Being in the Marching Band, he has shaped me to be a better person on and off the field,” said Juarez.

Andi Shaplo – Senior

Andi Shaplo loves history for an important reason.


“I care about the future,” said Shaplo (CHS 2026). “If we didn’t have the memories of our entire lives behind us, how are we to inform ourselves on what actions we should take, how we should respond, and how we should move?”

“We can’t,” he continued. “If we inflate that idea to the world, we can see that the present is just the next action, response, and movement of history. The world is the will of the past of humanity, just as much as each individual is the will of their own personal history.”

Shaplo participates in Slavic Club, CAST, Stage Crew and the Fall Play, and he enjoys biking. His influential teachers are Mr. Michael McCunney, Mr. John O’Reilly, and Mr. Gabriel Fahy.

A stand-out teacher was his ninth grade History teacher Mr. Gregory Cvetovich. He was the advisor of Shaplo’s favorite club, National History Day.

“When I didn’t have the grade necessary to move up to History Honors, he helped me get further by recommending to my counselor [that I] go up,” said Shaplo. “I’m unsure what he saw in me at the time, but it helped me understand how much further I could take my passion.”



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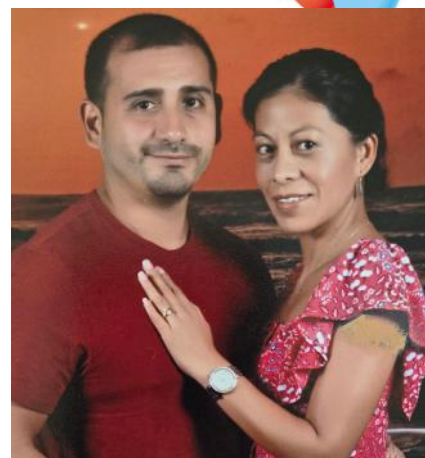
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- Birthdays & Celebrations - December 2025 -



Arianna Dubas who officially became an RN on July 3, turns 23 on Dec. 11. **Nick Zang** celebrates his 38th birthday on Dec. 10. That retired Athenia gem of a jeweler **Greg Lacki** is 68 on Dec. 5. **Luis** and **Sonia Cuba** celebrate their 26th anniversary on Dec. 18.

Marc Fazio 12/1
Ann W. Kissel 12/1
Corinne Miskowsky 12/1
Mannan Amin 12/2
Mike Gerardi 12/2
Lauren Lawler 12/2
Bryan Nolasco 12/2
Allison Ahdieh 12/3
Patrick Lotorto 12/3
Bridget Rice 12/3
Sharon Tichacek 12/3
Phyllis Galambos 12/4

Timothy Gumann 12/4
Michael Kester 12/4
Dave Sternbach 12/4
Michael Vinciguerra 12/4
Rosemary Kuruc 12/5
Laura Mikolajczyk 12/5
Michael Resselar 12/5
Tommy Coleman 12/6
Pat Collucci 12/6
Debbie Gorny 12/6
Marilyn Gossinger 12/6
Noel Coronel 12/7

Mark Mecca 12/7
Triana Garcia 12/8
Chris Sadowski 12/8
Bob Kester 12/9
Jamie Osmak 12/9
Daniel Fonesca Ramos 12/9
Mark Surgent 12/9
Andrew Tichacek 12/9
Tyler Roger Vandenberghe 12/9
Michael McEnerney 12/10
Bob Snelson 12/10
Joey Cofone 12/11
Kathleen M. Marshall 12/11
Diane Meyer 12/11
Joseph Rutigliano 12/11
Richard Peterson 12/12
Andy Kent 12/13
Danny La Gala 12/13
Christina Kedl 12/13
Ray Capilli 12/14
Mary Kate Kuruc 12/14
Michael Murolo 12/14
Jacklyn Nelson 12/14
Basil Worhach 12/14
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David Brock..... 12/16
Michael Hrina 12/16
Louise Siano 12/17
Hannah Grace Kulesa..... 12/17
Jacqueline Gencarrelli 12/18
Anne Gerardi 12/18
Samantha Bassford..... 12/19
Stephanie Guzowski..... 12/19
Nick Link 12/19



What's cooking **Tyler Vandenberghe**?
He'll turn 17 on Dec. 9!

Jayen Montague..... 12/19
Jessie Ducos 12/20
Amy Marino 12/21
Michelle McEnerney 12/22
Suman Pinto..... 12/22
Joey Crisantiello..... 12/24
Elizabeth Fazio..... 12/24
Soumya Gunapathy 12/24
Caroline Jane Hanlon..... 12/24
Luba Rembis 12/24
Ryan John Hariton 12/25

Eric Soltis 12/25
Thomas Montague 12/26
Venessa Collucci..... 12/27
Melissa Cordes 12/27
James Mazza..... 12/29
Steven Bivaletz..... 12/30
Hunter Conklin 12/30
Ivan Garcia 12/31
Courtney Pinter..... 12/31

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Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays from the Hawrylko Kids! From left, Nick, Tommy Jr., Arielle and Joe Hawrylko, and Casey and Eddie Bivaletz, with Josie, 2, and Lyla, 4! The Hawrylko, Angello and Bivaletz families are grateful for all we have and thank God for the many blessings in our lives. As we enter our 31st year as Clifton Magazine, our appreciation to all! Tom Hawrylko, Sr.

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