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2026 Unsung Hero

Learned Skills at Boys & Girls Club

In this magazine, we celebrate the Class of 2026 by sharing the memories, accomplishments and goals of high school grads from CHS, Catholic high schools and PCTI. Among them is Mustang Filip Alborzi, who was named the Passaic County 2026 Unsung Hero.

Alborzi's five-year plan includes studying Elementary Education at Montclair State University to become a teacher like those that he appreciated most at Clifton's School 2. He's begun preparing for his future by working at the Boys & Girls Club, where he's mentored kids and learned skills.

"That's where I've gained experience working with children and developed the communication, patience, and leadership needed," said Alborzi, 17. "I hope to inspire the next generation to love learning and be prepared for the future."

His decision to attend MSU was inspired by its teaching program, the beautiful campus, its proximity to his hometown, and its student activities. His own teachers attending MSU also inspired him to apply there.

CHS and the broader community have prepared the lifelong resident. He credited CHS Principal Ahmad Hamdeh and CAST teachers Michael McCunney and Joanna Huster, who Alborzi met in his freshman year. After McCunney encouraged him to take CAST sophomore year, a part of Alborzi's grade included recording events in the district.

"My favorite events were the Board of Education meetings. I got the opportunity to meet the Board members and the superintendent," said Alborzi. "Helping out ... made me consider becoming a teacher."



Passaic County's Unsung Hero Filip Alborzi with CHS Principal Ahmad Hamdeh and guidance counselor Gina Testa.

But volunteering last summer at The Club sealed the deal. Alborzi tutored in the STEM tent and helped manage the snack and lunch program.

"I'm most proud of my work at the Boys & Girls Club and receiving the Unsung Hero Award, which awarded my contributions in the school district that some people may not know about," the future teacher stated.

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In 2031, | WHERE WILL YOU BE?

As the Class of 2026 graduates, we asked them to share their thoughts and dreams for the future.

We also asked how they are putting it together now to reach their career and personal goals five years from now.

Here are some responses...

Hailey DeSaro: Hopefully back in Clifton and working as a middle school band director, because the music teachers in this district are amazing and have been my inspiration for so much of what I've done since middle school. My seventh and eighth grade Band teacher, Mr. Anthony Lanzerotti, has been my inspiration since day one. He was my introduction to Band in the summer before fourth grade in the I.S.E.E. program. My passion for music has grown so much since then. I was supposed to go to CCMS, but he was the reason why I transferred to WWMS. CHS Band Director Mr. Bryan Stepneski has also taught me skills that I will take with me throughout life. I learned discipline and the importance of taking initiative. These skills have made me into a great leader within the Mustang Band. I've taken all performing arts classes, such as Music Theory, Band, Piano 1, and Choir, to build skills that I'll need majoring in Music Education at William Paterson this fall and in my future career.



Gabriella Labocki, Joshua Segura, Jayme Ditren, Sebastian Abarca, Victoria Hidalgo.

Gabriella Labocki: I see myself further pursuing my career in Clinical Psychology. I've taken classes that correlate to a career as a clinical psychologist, such as Philosophy, Sociology, Human Behavior, and Psychology. I'm especially grateful for my AP Psychology teacher Mr. John O'Reilly for helping me to realize what kind of psychology I want to pursue. I'm interested in understanding people who feel like they are often misunderstood, and I love to help people.

Jayme Ditren: I am interested in Labor and Delivery Nursing. I have volunteered at different medical centers, city and community events, taken medical-focused classes underneath the Allied Health Academy throughout my years in high school, and I also became CPR certified.

Breanna Chiodo: I would like to become a writer. I have been practicing writing both in and outside of school. I write on a variety of subjects to explore new themes and ideas so that I further heighten my writing skills.

Alyssia Vazquez: I would love to be working with children in some way, hopefully in therapy or psychology. Communication and working with people of all ages and in different environments is what I strive to build upon every day. I'm preparing to reach that goal by learning what best fits in different circumstances and how, by helping others, I can improve how to handle different groups of people.



Joshua Segura: Reading, writing, learning, and analyzing are all helping me toward my future that will be somewhere in the legal field.

Brian Franco: The work ethic and the multitasking that I put into balancing Marching Band, Robotics, and my academics will allow me to reach my career goal. My goal is to work at a decent engineering company, where I can work my way up to becoming a full mechanical engineer.

Sebastian Abarca: I see myself teaching elementary school, striving to be that teacher who students remember positively and makes a difference in children's lives. My high school career has taught me many skills that will help me in the future, like patience, organization, confidence, and leadership. Extracurricular activities, like the CHS Marching Band, are such a key aspect to my success by teaching me all of my leading and discipline skills.

Brian Franco, Graciela Reyes De Jesus, Maida Ajeti.

Graciela Reyes De Jesus: Being a dentist, which will be possible by me getting a job and paying for my tuition. I have been eyeing this career for a while now, and I'm preparing for my goal with the help of my mom since she is a dentist who specializes in endodontics.

Leo Papp: I will most likely still be pursuing my education. After my degree, I want to be a lawyer or a professor in Philosophy or History. My current classes are mostly in the field of humanities, but in that schedule I am also taking AP Government and Politics. Outside of school, I try my best to read books that are in line with my career path.

Maida Ajeti: Taking a Future Teachers class and tutoring my little cousins have helped me build toward becoming an elementary school teacher.

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Leo Papp, Nino Rukhaia, Alyssia Vazquez, Breanna Chiodo, Emma Howard.

Sebastián Pulgarin: My plan is to become a Geospatial Data Scientist, and I have started preparing by learning coding, statistics, Structured Query Language (SQL), calculus, and Geographic Information System (GIS).

Emma Howard: Graduating from college and starting my teaching career as an elementary school teacher will be possible due to building my confidence and communication skills. I'm trying to push myself more in situations to help get me ready for college and eventually I will have the skills that will help me in my future classroom.



Jordan Kulesa: I picture myself working as an elementary school teacher, helping the younger ones grow every day. I want to create a classroom that makes everyone feel comfortable and welcomed. I hope to be a teacher who not only teaches students but also shows kindness and patience. Right now, I am building strong study habits by staying on top of my homework and making sure whatever I turn in is organized and put in with good effort. I am also working on improving my patience and how I communicate with people. These skills will help me reach my career goal by being able to connect with younger students.

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Mustangs of the Month

These two senior Mustangs may be unsung, but they're not unnoticed. The two other seniors who were spotlighted for their personal achievements and their school-wide contributions are Nadine Judeh and Ceylin Cinar, who were featured in the Top 10 students.

Marek Dlugopolski

When Marek Dlugopolski is looking for encouragement, there's no place like home.

"Seeing how hard [my mom] works and everything that she's overcome motivates me to work harder and take every opportunity available," said Dlugopolski.

Dlugopolski played Varsity Football and Lacrosse. He was captain of Boys Lacrosse for two years.

"In this season, we have achieved more wins than I have gotten with the team in the last three years," he stated.

Dlugopolski doesn't let hurdles discourage him. He balanced taking multiple AP classes with athletics and running a business.



Marek Dlugopolski, Anthony Stella.

"Managing all these responsibilities taught me how to manage my time for maximum efficiency and how to stay focused under pressure while working toward my goals," he explained.

One of his aspirations is attending Stevens Institute of Technology in order to earn a degree in Mechanical Engineering. Dlugopolski plans to simultaneously scale his detailing business, JD Auto Detailing LLC, into a successful and well-known company.

To see more about JD's work and the services of his firm, follow @jd.autodetailingco on Instagram.

"I stay motivated by focusing on the bigger picture and reminding myself that challenges are temporary," he said.

Anthony Stella

Anthony Stella focuses on where life can take him, but he understands the value of looking to the past for guidance.

"History [is my favorite subject], because I like learning about ... everything that has led to how our world is today," said Stella.

He greatly admires CAST II and III teacher Mr. Michael McCunney.

"[He] has been the most influential to me because of the way that he carries himself, [as well as] how he is always in a good mood and has a smile on his face," said Stella. "It makes me realize that we should be grateful for what we have."

Stella credited his family for helping him through the challenges that life has sent his way. One occurred in his freshman year when his grandmother passed away.

This September, he will attend Montclair State University's School of Business. He reached this point by understanding that the path to achieving goals isn't always easy.

"My parents inspire me the most," he said, "because of their support toward my goals and all of the hard work they put in to get to where they are today."

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Meet SOME Seniors

By Robert Niessen

Earned Leadership

The captain's armband didn't make Lucas Chen a leader — it simply made it visible that he was becoming one all along.

Soccer is part of his identity, shaped by his “10 years of club soccer” and four years on the CHS varsity field, where competition, communication, and consistency became second nature to him.

Somewhere between those seasons, the student government meetings, and five years as a drummer and guitarist at his church — where rhythm and precision guided every performance — leadership stopped feeling like a role that Chen stepped into and became something that he steadily built.

The Delawanna resident will attend Villanova University to study Business, carrying with him a high school experience defined by one enduring responsibility: captain.

“Wearing the captain's armband taught me the importance of communication and support,” said Chen, 18. “Whether that's with the coaches on what to do to help the team or it's bringing up teammates, I've found so much value in communicating with and supporting others.”

The same sense of responsibility extended beyond athletics. Chen carried that leadership into his role as Senior Class Vice President, where representation and decision-making demanded the same clarity and accountability that he practiced on the field.

Together, his experiences as captain and vice president refined his understanding of teamwork and responsibility, which he believes will “prove valuable when studying in the future.” Soccer, though, remained his most formative teacher.

“Clifton Soccer showed me dedication,” said Chen. “Some days you may not be up for training, but those are the practices that count the most.”



Medical Mustang

Leadership didn't come from having all the answers in Bayron Espailat's experience. It came from learning how to think, decide, and move forward with the people beside him. Espailat, 17, grew up in Botany Village and spent four years on the Student Council. Planning events, collaborating with peers, and sharing responsibilities became defining elements of his high school journey.

In Choir all four years and Track for two, it was Student Council that most clearly refined how he understands leadership as he prepares for a future in nursing. Espailat will take the BSN track with a Pre-Med focus.

"What I've learned from leading is that it takes time to learn how to be a good 'leader', and that there are many different ways to lead," he said, stressing the importance of collective effort, explaining the need "to rely on your team; in my case, other Student Council members" and to "take it one step at a time."

When it comes to college, Espailat is still weighing his options and unsure where he will attend. His pursuits are certain, though, and he shared that his interest with nursing comes in part from how he loves "talking to people and becoming friends with others," along with his strong interest in science and "the wide range of jobs that I could do with it, especially with the job security that it entails."

Espailat hopes to carry more than just experience into his future. Student Council was never just a line on an application — it was a long lesson in shared responsibility, learning when to speak and when to listen, and discovering that progress is rarely loud. It is built quietly, collectively, moment by moment; until one day you look up and realize you have led others all along. "I hope to take with me the dedication that I learned," said Espailat, "as well as the friends that I made along the way."



Pressing Rewind

Valerie Jimenez found a way to press pause, rewind, and feel memories all over again. She will study Cinematic Arts at Bergen Community College, but the CHS senior's path into film didn't begin with a script — it began with a moment. "I went through a change in my life, and I wanted to record my thoughts and feelings," said Jimenez, 18.

What started as a personal outlet evolved into something more deliberate: a project that spanned over a month and reshaped how she viewed creativity itself.

"After finishing the video, I watched it and I was really proud of it," said Jimenez, adding that she has since felt driven to recreate the same sense of fulfillment.

For Jimenez, film is just as experiential as it is visual. "The nice thing about films is that you can watch it again and again, and still relive the emotions brought you the first time," she said.

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Meet SOME Seniors

In that sense, her work transforms from just a project into a vessel, one that preserves fleeting emotions and allows them to be revisited long after they might have otherwise faded.

In high school, Jimenez balanced creative ambition with discipline and commitment. She dedicated four years to the Mustang Marching Band and contributed for two years to the National History Day team. Her journey was still not without its challenges.

“I’ve definitely had my ups and downs throughout high school whether it was grades or socially,” said Jimenez. It is through those moments, she reflected, that she uncovered her most valuable lesson: “High school has taught me that I’ll always be able to recover from my ‘downs,’ and that it’s an important part of growing and learning.”

Now, Jimenez steps forward not just as a student of film, but as someone who understands its deeper resonance. For her, a camera is not just a tool: it is a timekeeper, a translator of feeling, and a way to hold onto what would otherwise disappear. As her story continues, she won’t just be capturing moments — she’ll be giving them a place to live, long after they’ve passed.

Earning Her Stripes

While some students carry around formulas, Leah Brown was busy storing a personal encyclopedia of animal facts in her mind.

The Athenia native is preparing to begin an exciting new chapter at Rowan University, where she plans to study Biology on the Pre-Veterinary track. Her path forward is rooted in a lifelong passion that has followed her since childhood.

“I have always loved animals,” shared Brown, 18. “I always had a bunch of animal facts ready to go just in case anyone needed them,” she added, noting that with the power of hindsight, it “was a little odd, because no one ever did.”

It wasn’t only a “love for animals and nature” that guided the CHS senior toward veterinary medicine, but also the power of representation. She explained that “seeing people, or more specifically women that looked like me in highly educated and innovative spaces” helped her understand what was possible and inspired her to aim high.



Volunteer Leah Brown with Simba at the Clifton Animal Shelter.

Brown spent two years of high school playing flag football, balancing academics with athletics. Whether in the classroom or on the field, she’s developed discipline, teamwork, and resilience — qualities that will serve her well in college and beyond.

Looking back on high school, Brown realized that she learned how to make the most of every chance to grow.

“One lesson high school has instilled in me is the importance of embracing every educational opportunity,” she said. “CHS has taught me that any chance to challenge myself and grow academically is always worth taking.”

Now, as she heads to Rowan University, the student who once

shared animal facts for fun is preparing to care for animals professionally; turning a lifelong love into a meaningful future.

The Sound of Ambition

If CHS had a soundtrack these past four years, there’s a good chance that Daureen Neptune helped write it.

From Botany Village to the stages and sidelines, Neptune spent high school surrounded by music, movement, and momentum. This September, she’ll take that same determination to Rutgers University – Newark, where she plans to study Pre-Engineering.

Neptune participated in Marching Band, Wind Ensemble, and Jazz Band for all four years of high school. She also spent a year in Choir and three years in the Spring Musical productions.

Her days were frequently filled with rehearsals, performances, and long practices. Yet those moments became some of the most meaningful parts of her journey. Whether under stadium lights or on stage in front of a crowd, she consistently embraced every opportunity to grow.

There’s one name that always shines a little brighter than the rest in her life — her mother and “shining star”, Dinette Antoine.

“My mom has been a constant source of support,” said Neptune, 18. Whenever she wanted “to try something new or take a risk,” her mother was “always right beside me, supporting and guiding me down the right path.”

One of the greatest lessons that high school taught Neptune is the value of surrounding yourself with the right people.

“It’s important to surround yourself with people who not only encourage your passions and ambitions,” said Neptune, “but also stand by you during difficult times.”

As she prepares for college, Neptune carries more than academic preparation with her. She brings discipline from rehearsals, confidence from performances, and wisdom from the people who stood beside her. The next chapter may begin in engineering, but it will still move to the rhythm that she created at CHS.

Three-Star Scientist

Curiosity never felt constrained to one place for Galo Mariano. One day it lived in a kitchen recipe, the next in a chemistry equation. Somewhere in between, it ended up among the stars, science labs, and wrestling mats.

By the time high school began winding down, Mariano had already constructed a world where culinary experimentation and scientific discovery coexisted naturally. Now the PCTI senior and Botany native will bring that passion to Cornell University, where he will study Food Science.

The field will allow him to unite recipe development with the chemistry and physics that first captivated him in the classroom. “I always loved trying new food, so I wanted to learn how to cook and develop my own recipes for



Daureen Neptune and her mother, Dinette Antoine.

my favorite foods,” said Mariano, 18.

What started as a fascination with flavor gradually evolved into a deeper appreciation for science itself.

“I took various science courses that enchanted me with their research and calculations,” said Mariano. Food science, he realized, was the perfect intersection of both passions. “I get the recipe development that I love from culinary and the research from chemistry and physics.”

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Meet SOME Seniors

That equilibrium between creativity and rigor became a defining motif throughout high school. Mariano spent two years competing in ProStart Culinary Competitions. He also participated in the NASA HUNCH Food Science Competition, wrestled for two years, served as Astronomy Club president for two years, served as Vice President of Rho Kappa Honors Society, and joined PCTI's Book Club.

His decision to attend Cornell University carried equal significance since it is the "number one institute for food science," he said. He added that the university's "Ivy League prestige" and exceptional financial aid opportunities helped make the decision possible.

Those resources ultimately earned him a full ride, allowing him to pursue his ambitions at one of the nation's premier institutions. Despite his accomplishments, Mariano said that one lesson has remained constant throughout high school: humility.

"One thing that I was constantly taught was to stay humble," he reflected.

That included during culinary competitions, AP classes, or wrestling matches. Instead of seeing competition as discouragement, he learned to reinterpret it as inspiration. He is eager to begin experimenting fearlessly, refining relentlessly, and understanding that discovery rarely happens by accident.

These instincts will serve him, and help him serve others, as both a scientist and a chef.

"There's always going to be someone better," said Mariano. "You shouldn't let it deter you, but rather let it inspire you to be better than you were yesterday."

Counting Beats and Balance Sheets

Somewhere between sheet music, legal arguments, and balance sheets, Kelsey Taveras Suarez discovered a future that somehow harmonized all three. Living in Dutch Hill,

Suarez moved seamlessly between creativity and logic, building a schedule that reflected both sides of her personality.

She dedicated four years at CHS to Choir, eventually becoming the group's social media chair. She participated in Mock Trial for two years, musicals for



Written in the stars: culinary pro Galo Mariano.

three years, the school play for one year, and the Swim team for a season.

Together, it formed the cadence of her high school experience. Suarez will attend Montclair State University this fall to study accounting, a decision grounded equally in ambition and practicality. Choosing a college was not a process that she approached impulsively.

"The main factor that my parents and I often discussed was the cost," said Suarez, 17, on how important it was to choose "a college that won't send you into too much debt," while still finding "a school you see yourself thriving in."

When she visited Montclair, the balance became clear almost immediately.

"I knew that I could thrive there if I used my resources correctly," Suarez shared. "The campus is also beautiful and reserved to just students, and I really loved that."

Her decision to pursue accounting emerged just as naturally.

"I've always loved math and law, and I want to help people in any way possible," said Suarez. Discovering accounting felt like finding the intersection where all of those interests converged. "When I found out that accounting contained all three of these aspects, it convinced me."

What excites her most is the field's versatility. As she prepares for Montclair, Suarez carries forward a rare blend of analytical precision and artistic instinct. She is already envisioning a future in entertainment, particularly music.

"Accounting is applicable for any industry," she said.



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Meet SOME Seniors



Cameron Villanueva

Lifting the Curtain

Before the curtain rises or a camera clicks, there's a suspended moment in time when everything depends on trust — and Cameron Villanueva has learned how to live there.

From the Athenia neighborhood to the stages, studios, and fields of CHS, Villanueva has spent four years immersed in the arts. She doesn't just participate, she leads with intention. This fall, she will bring that creative foundation to Montclair State University, where she plans to study Visual Communications while working toward a certification in Art Education.

Villanueva cultivated a dynamic presence in the arts: Four years in the Dance program, three years in Photography, four years as a Stage Manager, a designer for the 2026 yearbook, one year managing the senior class's social media, and four years choreographing for the ISEE summer program.

"Over the last four years, I had the time to take on multiple leadership roles within our arts department," said Villanueva, 18.

She credited her growth to the teachers like Ms. Jessica Ondeck, Ms. Haley Connington, Mrs. Beth Slanina, Mr. Bryan Stepneski, and Ms. Lisa Poggi. Educators who, she explained, "trusted me to correctly do my job and do it as smoothly as possible."

That trust became a turning point. "Being able to trust

myself in my work was an obstacle I had to get over," she shared, adding she "had to be confident in what I was doing to make sure that the people under me can do their jobs smoothly as well."

Dance offered one of her most enduring lessons.

"Being a dancer means [not being] afraid of critiques," said Villanueva, "[and] learning how to effectively apply your corrections." That became a discipline — one that will continue to shape her future studies and creative work.

Now, Villanueva carries more than experience; she carries presence. The kind that is built in rehearsal rooms, behind curtains, and under lights; the kind that doesn't just respond to the moment but anticipates it.

Because for her, the performance doesn't begin when the curtain rises — it begins moments before, where preparation meets trust, and she's already ready.

Scripts and Science

Somewhere between the hush before a line is spoken and the wave of applause that follows, Elizabeth Martinique learned how to transform presence into confidence.

Albion was never just a section of Clifton — it was the starting point in a journey that gradually expanded into stage lights, orchestra pits, and the living, breathing world of CHS theatre.

Involvement wasn't extra — it was essential.

“Since middle school, I have tried to get involved as much as possible, whether it be through music, theatre, or volunteering,” said Martinique, 18.

Over the past four years, she has immersed herself in Orchestra and Tri-M. She also spent three years in plays and musicals, as well as contributed her time to Key Club, Care Club, Interact Club, and the Christian Student Association.

“Those experiences have helped me find my voice and grow as a person,” she shared.

Among all her commitments, Martinique described CHS theatre as “one of the best experiences I have ever had.” It was a space where confidence wasn’t simply encouraged but cultivated. The collaboration, repetition, and performances helped her to develop a presence that extended far beyond the stage.

“I have gained so much confidence and met so many people,” said Martinique.

Martinique plans to study Chemistry at Montclair State University, which like theatre demands precision, curiosity, and imagination. Even as she steps into science, she has no intention of stepping away from the stage.

“I plan to continue to do theatre in college and beyond,” she said.

As she prepares for the future, Martinique carries more than academic ambition. She carries the echo of rehearsals, the discipline of performance, and the version of herself that she discovered under stage lights.



Elizabeth Martinique

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Top ★ Mustangs

By Ariana Puzzo

The **Top 10 Mustangs of 2026** earned their rankings academically, but there is more to the remarkable group. They have big plans for the future, including careers in STEM, education or taking on the business world.

Becoming Class Valedictorian isn't something that Josephine Zagorski takes for granted. It's the culmination of her academic journey, starting in seventh grade while holding the Honor Society's torch.

"I worked hard enough to be the one passing it down again in eighth grade. That moment stuck with me," said Zagorski, 17. "I never stopped pushing myself academically, even while balancing softball and everything else high school throws at you."

She never got "comfortable", but she plans to ensure others' comfort in her career. Zagorski will attend The College of New Jersey this fall, where she will continue her softball career and study to become a physical therapist.

She's drawn to physical therapy and played softball since T-ball in kindergarten. She progressed from club ball in middle school to starting catcher on Clifton's Varsity team in her freshman year. Spending summers with her family in an RV is where she resets.

"Growing up, those trips felt like the biggest adventure and, even now as a senior, that hasn't changed one bit," she said. "No matter how busy life gets, those weeks are sacred to me."

Salutatorian Rosana Bogev is passionate about traveling and seeing the world, and she's eager to visit different countries and experience their cultures after completing dental school.

The Clifton Track athlete and Key Club volunteer will study Biology at Rutgers – New Brunswick on the pre-dental track to become a general dentist. For Clifton Track, she broke a minute in the 400-meter race, which was one of her season goals.

"I have always liked to go to the dentist," said Boge, 18. "I like the idea of helping people gain confidence through their smiles, and I feel like I would enjoy my job."

Looking back, Boge would tell her younger, freshman-year self that everything will eventually "fall into place" and that patience is essential. When asked who she would choose if she could dine with any historical figure, her answer didn't disappoint.



#1 Josephine Zagorski and #2 Rosana Boge.



"[Princess Diana] was such a kind and loving person, and I feel like it would be interesting to talk about all her accomplishments," said Boge. "She got along with people very well, and I feel like dinner with her wouldn't be boring."

Third-in-her-class Nadine Judeh is a leader — just ask the CHS student body.

As the President of the Student Council Association, Judeh has striven to represent her peers and create an environment where their opinions could be voiced and heard. During her tenure, the SCA hosted the first-ever "Culture Night" and collected food for a Thanksgiving food drive.

"The most valuable thing that I have learned, by far, is the act of listening, respecting, and advocating for others' opinions, especially when they do not align with my own," said Judeh, 17. "I know this will help me in all future endeavors."

Judeh will attend Seton Hall University as a Biochemistry major with a minor in Arabic Studies. She's eager to embrace their "research opportunities, welcoming environment, and amazing study abroad program."

Although her career goal is to become a physician, she has played the violin since age 5.

“I learned persistence, perseverance, and discipline from an early age,” she said. “I credit the hard work in my studies, and a dedication to my extracurricular activities, to my experience of learning to play the violin.”

Fulfillment through music and live performance set Dexter Caliolio on a path that culminated in him becoming fourth in his graduating class.

Caliolio has participated in Strings/Orchestra since the fourth grade.

“I don’t think I would be ‘me’ if I had never picked up the violin,” said Caliolio, 18.

His older brother, Jeb Caliolio (CHS 2018) greatly influences him. Caliolio volunteered summers at Clifton’s I.S.E.E. program as a teaching assistant to Ms. Paulina Edel. He helped instruct kids in grades 1-8 on how to be better string players and musicians, giving back about 200 hours.

“I truly loved being a part of it,” he said.

An interest in exploration and generous financial aid



#3 Nadine Judeh and #4 Dexter Caliolio.

package has given Caliolio the opportunity to study at Vas-sar College. His career path is undecided, but he’s excited for the journey.

“Follow your heart and intuition. Not only will you end up where you need to go, but you won’t be burdened by any regrets.”



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Top ★ Mustangs

Milena Bednarczyk became **fifth** in her class by putting in the work, time, and effort — whether it was in the classroom, winning State Championships for Mock Trial, or working as a hostess at the Grand Saloon.

It's her first job and she's worked there for the past two years, gaining communication skills and creating connections with customers.

"The Grand Saloon has always been a local restaurant ... and working here gave me a closer look into the lives of those I am surrounded by everyday but would not normally interact with," said Bednarczyk, 18. "Every encounter matters."

Bednarczyk spent almost all four years participating in CHS Mock Trial, where she "learned the power of one's voice" and more about the justice system. She credited CHS 2024 grads Omar Ali and Patricia Baroud as "exceptional thinkers that helped lead me into the realm of activism."

In September, she'll begin studying Social Work on Fordham's Rose Hill campus.

"I have no doubt that the Bronx will open so many doors for me, whether that is meeting new people, learning about different ideas, or gaining new experiences."

Alexis Smith is tied for fifth in her class, but she's her own person with a keen interest in looking at the past to inform her future.

"If I could have dinner with Mary Wollstonecraft," said Smith, 18, "I'd want to hear firsthand how she developed such bold ideas about women's rights at a time when they were widely rejected. ... I'd be especially interested in how she stayed confident in her beliefs despite criticism, and what advice she'd give about pushing for change in the modern world."

Smith will study Marketing at The College of New Jersey as a Cross Country/Track athlete. As an advanced sophomore, half of her degree is already completed through Bergen Community College General Associate's degree program.



#5 Milena Bednarczyk and #5 Alexis Smith.

Her past volunteer efforts include: Power of One for the elderly and disabled, Passaic County Youth Task Force to help bring an end to teen vaping and drug abuse, Vice President of the Student Council Association, plus more.

"My resilience and adaptability are ... more valuable achievements to me than anything specifically tangible," she said.

Working hard and staying humble led to Ceylin Cinar ranking seventh in her class, but she also made time to embrace her Kavkaz and Circassian heritage.

Cinar, 17, is most proud of her involvement with Elbrus USA dance and the larger American Karachay Kavkaz Benevolent Association community.

"I had never really been connected to my culture, but I remember seeing a performance by the ensemble when I was a child and dreamed of being a part of it," she said. "It was definitely out of my comfort zone, but I was able to perform last year and continue to perform at the end of May this year."

Cinar's plans include attending Rutgers – New Brunswick and becoming an industrial engineer. She loves art, history, and design, relating to the design and creation process of engineering.

The Key Club volunteer and The Clifton Times student-journalist also appreciates the innovative and creative minds of others.

“If I were to bring three artists to a concert for the school, I think I would bring Bad Bunny, Don Toliver, and Kali Uchis,” said Cinar.

Even when she overworked herself, Jenna Alnatur became the eighth in her class with a strong support system.

“My mom, Suhair (CHS 2001), ... is always right there supporting me and making sure I’m taken care of,” said Alnatur, 17. “She is such an inspiration to me and shows me it is never too late to pursue your dreams.”

Alnatur was elected as the 2025 New Jersey Girls State Governor, witnessing state and local government in action while receiving support from her peers.

“This experience marked a period of immense personal growth and reinforced my confidence in my ability to lead, collaborate, and rise to challenges,” she said.

Alnatur, who has played Clifton Volleyball and volunteered as a Taekwondo Instructor at Elite Child Develop-



#7 Ceylin Cinar and #8 Jenna Alnatur.

ment Academy, will study Government at Cornell University. She’s interested in pursuing a career in corporate law, but she isn’t limiting herself.

“I hope to advocate for human rights and contribute to making the justice system more fair and equitable.”

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Top ★ Mustangs

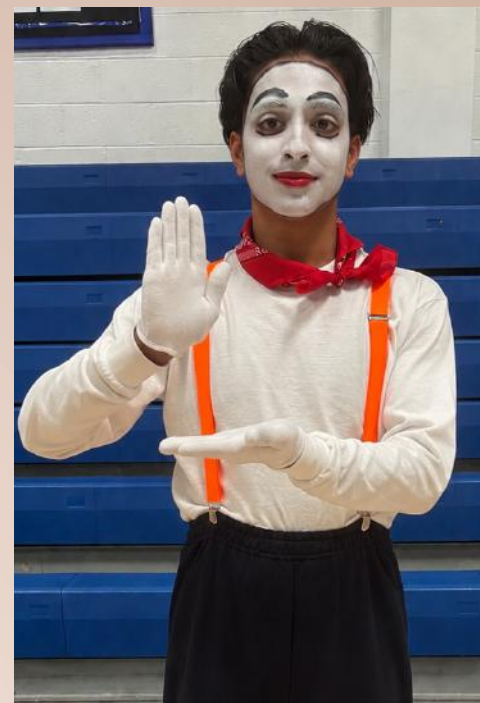
Arielle O'Rourke has learned and grown in high school, and that is what the ninth in her class plans to keep doing after she leaves Colfax Ave.

Her advice to her freshman-year self is straightforward.

“Join more clubs and be more involved,” said O'Rourke, 18. “I will be following that advice in my freshman year of college.”

But she did put herself out there in high school. Along with learning guitar and writing her own songs, she was commissioned to draw a pencil portrait and O'Rourke's artwork was shown in the annual CHS Art Show for all four years.

O'Rourke credited Graphic Design teacher Ms. Beth Slanina as a “positive influence” in class, which is where O'Rourke got to collaborate and help create the CHS Yearbook. O'Rourke also enjoys



#9 Arielle O'Rourke and #10 Tapan Mistry.

reading classic literature and one of her favorite authors is Herman Melville.

The next stop for her creative mind is NJIT, where she will study Chemistry.

“I liked the campus when I visited it, especially the Makerspace,” she said. “I want to have a career in chemistry.”

Rounding out the Top 10 is Tapan Mistry, who credits family as the guiding influence on his life and successes.

“[My grandfather] has always had a strong work ethic and showed me what it looks like to stay consistent and responsible in everything you do,” said Mistry, 17. “Even as he got older, he still made the effort to help out, give rides, and support the family whenever he was needed.”

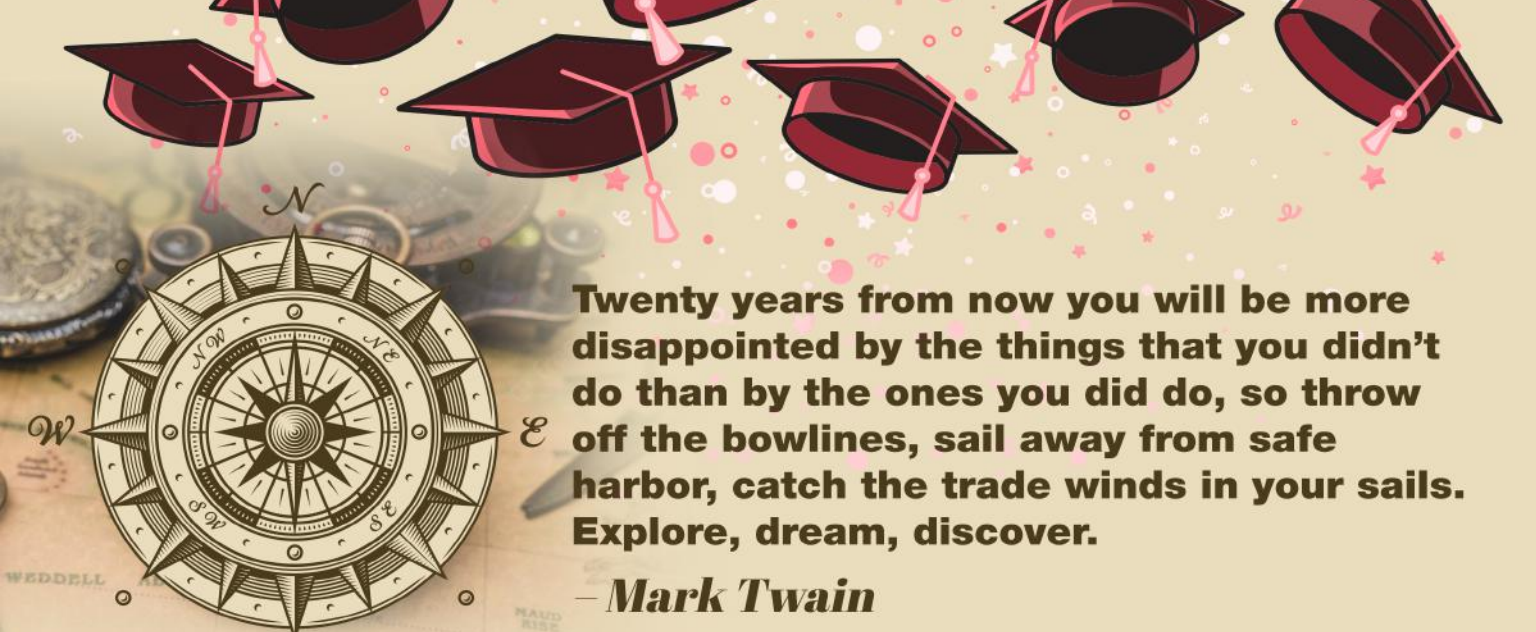
Mistry ran Clifton Track, volunteered in the transport department at St. Joseph's for two years, and has mimed since the fourth grade. The last activity inspired creativity and confidence in a way that's unique from academic and athletic achievements.

In September, he will study Finance at Rutgers, which fits his academic goals and allows him to stay close to home. Mistry's ideal historical figure to share dinner with is Nelson Mandela.

“He spent 27 years in prison and still came out with a mindset focused on rebuilding a divided country,” he said. “His ability to lead with patience and purpose, even after so much hardship, is something that I find really powerful.”

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Electricians, Auto Techs & Trades

By Ariana Puzzo

Finding His Spark

If more than one lightbulb went off over Adner Encarnacion's head when choosing his career path, the future electrician deserves full credit.

"When I was younger, I liked taking things apart and trying to fix or rewire them. Even though I didn't have a high success rate, it never stopped me from enjoying the feeling of trying," said Encarnacion. "So I chose what I loved doing."

Encarnacion will attend Lincoln Technical Institute this fall for the electrician program. He sees himself working in the electrical field in a stable, well-paying job as a licensed electrician. One day, he might even rise to become an electrical engineer.

"I'm a hands-on learner who needs to touch and feel, as well as look at, whatever is in front of me to be able to fully 100% understand it," said Encarnacion, 18. "I'd like to gain experience, build my skills, and learn the proper techniques through trade school."

But he's not limiting himself. He plans to become an electrical apprentice or a trainee for an electrical company. Encarnacion credits the CHS teachers and community for preparing him beyond simply academics.

"Clifton, as a community, has provided [me with] a lot of opportunities and resources that are easy to access, which made it easier for me to find what I needed and stay on track," he said. "Maybe one day I'll be able to own a business."

A Bright Future

Those who know Benjamin Smith know that he's a hands-on guy, which is precisely why he's taking a hands-on approach to his future career and education.

Smith, who is ranked 37th in his class, played Clifton Hockey and Lacrosse for all four years and was the Lacrosse team captain for the last two years. He plans to pursue an associate's degree while attending trade school to become an electrician.



Adner Encarnacion and the Smith twins Benjamin and Alexis.

"I'd like to move into a leadership role or possibly start my own electrical business once I gain enough experience and knowledge," said Smith, 18. "I want to continue growing professionally and create a successful future for myself."

Ambition runs in the family. Smith's twin sister, Alexis, is ranked fifth in their class. He credits her as being his biggest academic inspiration.

"Watching [Lexie] pull off the impossible — earning an associate's degree before she even receives her high school diploma — is a level of hustle that I truly admire," he said. "I'm so proud to be her twin."

Never one for sitting still, Smith spent most of his youth outdoors fixing items and learning how things work. The practical work that lies ahead excites him, because he'll witness his results on a daily basis as he continues to learn.

"Combining trade school with an associate's degree gives me the opportunity to gain real-world skills while also continuing my education," said Smith. "This path will allow me to start building a career earlier and avoid spending four years focused mostly on classroom learning that may not relate directly to my career goals. It feels like the best balance between education, experience, and preparing for a successful future."

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Road To Success

By Ariana Puzzo

As a kid of the mid-70's and early 80's, John Zirpoli found himself drawn to the TV shows and movies that had cool cars or motorcycles as a major focus in the show.

The CHS Auto Shop teacher grew up on shows like *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *CHiPs*, *Happy Days*, and *Magnum, P.I.* "Thinking back to all of these shows and movies, I can now understand where my love of Mopars and GM cars and trucks came from," said Zirpoli.

That is the kind of passion that Zirpoli has brought to his Mustang automotive classes for nearly two years. He has 106 students this year with six girls in the first-year class, four of whom are seniors. Roughly one third of his 75 seniors are interested in becoming a mechanic. "With AI taking over so many jobs, the trades are going to be one of the most in-demand jobs out there," said Zirpoli.

Jacob Rojas

Senior Jacob Rojas' affinity for cars began when he would keep them in his pockets. "As a kid, I always loved cars," said Rojas. "I took Auto Shop, because I don't like other people touching my stuff. Mr. Zirpoli teaching us how to fix and replace things on our cars like the axles, brakes, and oil changes means I can do that myself at home."

He heard about Auto Shop freshman year after transferring from Paterson Schools. Since then, he has decided that he wants to "learn as much as I can about fixing things on my car or on other peoples' cars."

Excelling in his field is his goal. He'll continue working toward that in September when he gets an apprenticeship to work as a diesel mechanic at Penske. His strengths in the field include focusing on the smaller details and understanding the specific torque specs that go into every build.

"I'm eager to learn and improve further, as I explore my next steps, by making sure that I have every part that I need to work on the vehicle," said Rojas. "I would also like to learn how to rebuild an engine and how to engine-swap."



Luis Perez Jr., Manuel Molina and Jacob Rojas with John Zirpoli.

Manuel Molina

The prospect of working on high-end cars and getting paid for what he loves doing appeals to Manuel Molina. The senior learned about Auto Shop from a friend who knew that Molina was interested in cars. A career in the automotive industry means that he will be able to expect good pay, especially if he becomes a master technician.

Those jobs can see you earning up to six figures depending on your location, brand certification, and experience level. But it all means more than the prospect of a well-paying job. "Working with [my] hands and solving problems gives me a sense of pride from knowing that I solved that problem," said Molina.

The long-term goal is, in fact, becoming a master technician, but Molina would also like to open his own shop someday. This September, he will hopefully start his apprenticeship in the union, which will help him with learning in the field while being paid at the same time so he can solely focus on the work.

"My strengths are listening and how fast I can absorb that knowledge and put it into practice to increase my proficiency," said Molina. "But I'm eager to improve my speed [while], at the same time, doing the work properly."

Luis Perez

Getting his hands dirty and figuring out any problem with a car is Luis Perez's favorite part of Auto Shop class. The knowledge that he can "get my hands in there and fix it" motivates him toward a career in the automotive industry.

"I think it's everything that grabs my attention in mechanics," said Perez. "I love seeing the parts of a car running and how everything works. One problem [can make] the whole thing fail."

His sister's boyfriend told him about the class. In September, Perez will take what he's learned and enroll in Universal Technical Institute to become a diesel technician.

"My long-term goal in this field would be to finish diesel mechanics and one day open a diesel shop," said Perez. "Strengths that I got from this class [is] having more of an eye to see basic problems or repairs [needed] to a car."

Learning By Doing

Keeping students engaged is always one of the main goals for Zirpoli. "Knowing that the majority of my students are no different than I was at their age," he said, "I want to make their class time as productive, enjoyable, and memorable as I can."

Theory can seem boring, so he strives to give students "real world, firsthand experiences" to relate to his lessons. Zirpoli encourages students to bring their own car to work on in the shop. He has taken students on trips to Lincoln Tech, Universal Technical Institute, the BMW training center, and Penske-owned dealerships.

"I feel that in learning any trade, you learn by doing," said Zirpoli.

It was certainly the case for him. His first job in high school was pumping gas at the Shell station down the street from his house. During free time, he spent it with the shop mechanics so that he could watch and learn "as much as I could from them" about cars and how they worked.

Zirpoli attended DeVry Technical for computer programming, but he realized after two years that his heart wasn't in it. It took him a year to refocus on auto mechanics and enroll at Lincoln Tech.

"After graduating in 1991, I started my journey as a Chrysler technician and within about five years, I was a certified Chrysler and ASE master technician," said Zirpoli.

A bad car accident and an injury that placed him on disability led to his eventual pursuit of teaching. A friend had told him about an opportunity to work as a part-time assistant for a local automotive program.

"I figured I would give it a shot. I ended up really enjoying the time that I spent with the kids in the shop and stayed for a few years until deciding I was in good enough shape to return to work as a technician full time," he said.

After another two-and-a-half years spent in the field, his wife informed him about CHS looking for an Auto Shop teacher and asked him to apply for the position. "I'm thankful that I listened to her," said Zirpoli. "The students and everyone at the high school are great, and I am blessed to be part of such a great school."

Seeing kids focus on a career is a reward. "And to see how many of them want to continue their education to become an automotive or diesel technician is a gift," he said.

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A Future on the Front Line

By Ariana Puzzo

There's no looking before you leap when you're rescuing someone from a plane crash or trying to resuscitate an infant. But there are instincts and skills that Augustus "Gus" Karlicki built each day working as an Emergency Medical Technician.

Karlicki, 18, will graduate later this month from Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey. In the fall, he will start studying Nursing at the University of Rhode Island. Karlicki knew that he was interested in becoming a nurse due to his past experiences as an EMT.

"I constantly work alongside nurses every day and get to be a witness to the life-saving care that they provide," said Karlicki. "It motivated me to pursue a career as an ER nurse."

It's fast-paced, but he's used to that in other areas of his life. Karlicki was a founding member of the Don Bosco Prep Rugby team and played the position of lock during his four years. Karlicki is set to play D1 Rugby at URI.

"URI was a fit for me, because it [will allow] me to get the experience of a big school while also receiving a top-tier education," said Karlicki.

Nursing A Passion

Running toward danger to protect others is a calling — and Karlicki knew that he wanted to answer that call from an early age.

Karlicki first started volunteering with the Moonachie First Aid and Rescue Squad in November of 2024. He was motivated by his family of first responders, specifically his uncle Bart Giaconia who is a Captain with the Passaic Fire Department.

"Growing up, he volunteered as an EMT in a neighboring town," said Karlicki. "I always looked up to the stories that he would tell and how he was given the opportunity to help people every day."

Karlicki spent last summer taking classes at Passaic County Community College to officially get certified as an EMT. He is currently taking classes at the Bergen County EMS Training Center in order to further his EMT education. But he isn't stopping there.

"I'm taking a class now as a rescue technician, which involves jumping out of buildings to rescue people from plane crashes," said Karlicki. "I especially [want to] thank my parents for motivating me over the last four years.



They have always pushed me to be my best self and to never settle for less."

All of which is what he plans to bring to a career in nursing — a path that excites him since it's his own opportunity to further help others. Despite appreciating the role and responsibilities of EMTs, Karlicki pointed out that EMTs in New Jersey have limitations to their services that they can provide.

"This can often leave us relying on higher medical authority, such as paramedics and nurses, who have a much wider scope of practice than EMTs," said Karlicki.

He wants to become a nurse so that he can help the people around him and to ensure that all of his patients receive the highest level of care that he can provide for them.

"For me, there is no better feeling than making someone's day even the slightest bit better when they call upon the ambulance in [what are] sometimes the worst moments of their life," he said.

Relying on Faith

Letting his faith guide and support him has played a significant role in the Cliftonite's life. Karlicki attended St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic School in Passaic prior to Don Bosco Prep and had a strong foundation with his faith. But he developed a profound gratitude for all that his Catholic education has given him.

"Bosco allowed me to deepen those beliefs and make my Catholic faith a massive part of my life," said Karlicki. "Throughout high school, I faced countless struggles, including bad grades, rough calls, and overall stress of being a teenager."

"Without having the Catholic faith that Bosco provided me with," he continued, "I would have had no way to cope with or handle these situations."

He applied those grounding principles while in the field as an EMT. Karlicki recalled an instance when he was assisting other EMTs on the ambulance in Moonachie.

A call came in for an 18-month-old baby who had drowned and was in cardiac arrest as soon as Karlicki arrived at their building, still wearing his school uniform.

"When we arrived on scene, I was the first one out of the ambulance and was greeted with one of my lieutenants running the baby's lifeless body out to me," said Karlicki. "I, along with other members of the ambulance, had to continuously provide resuscitation ... as she kept going in and out of pulselessness."

The infant had a pulse and was crying by the time that they arrived at the hospital, but that was all the first responders knew. Karlicki and the other EMTs never learned the outcome of the call, including if the baby survived or if there were any complications.

"This was extremely hard for me to handle at 17," said Karlicki. "Without my faith, I would have had no clue how to handle it."



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Faith and Family

By Ariana Puzzo

Kindness, compassion, and a desire to help others have guided Crystal Castro as the tenets of her Catholic upbringing and education.

Castro attended St. Andrew's, St. Philip's, and will graduate this month from DePaul Catholic in Wayne. The Clifton resident is set to attend Rutgers – New Brunswick in the School of Arts and Sciences while majoring in Biology. Yet, she still holds her early teachings close to her.

"My Catholic education ... has influenced the way that I see the world, by encouraging me to treat people with respect and understanding, no matter their background or experiences," said Castro, 18. "I have learned the value of perseverance, gratitude, and service to others. My faith will continue to guide me."

Pursuing higher education at Rutgers gives her the opportunity to feel academically challenged while staying connected to her family. It strikes a perfect balance between maintaining proximity while gaining independence and the college experience.

"What excites me most about my future is becoming



more independent and experiencing new opportunities that will help me grow as a person," said Castro. "I am especially excited to take advantage of internships, research programs, and other opportunities offered through Rutgers University."

Castro "fell in love" with the campus' liveliness and diversity, immediately picturing herself growing there over the next several years.

"I look forward to meeting new people, learning new skills, and stepping outside of my comfort zone," she continued. "I am excited to build a future for myself while discovering who I am both academically and personally."

There is someone else to offer credit to for instilling that confidence. Castro considers her father, Jimmy, when naming her most positive influence in the past four years.

"He has always encouraged me to push through obstacles and never give up, even when things become difficult," she said. "His advice and support motivated me to stay focused and continue working hard toward my goals."

"I've taken his words to heart, and they have helped shape the person that I am today," added Castro.

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Marta Dudkevych's motivation since middle school was to help others. And she's seen just how essential nursing is in every corner of the world. And that view is ancestral.

"Based on the gruesome events back home in Ukraine due to the invasion by Russia, I have witnessed the magic that nurses do with compassionate care and skill," said Dudkevych, 17, whose parents emigrated from Ukraine in 2003.

Her family includes her parents, Andriy and Mariya, and her older brother, Ivan. Her dad Andriy is the pastor of St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church on President St., Passaic and her mom Mariya is a K-fourth grade Ukrainian language teacher at St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic School.

Dudkevych, who will graduate this month from Saint Mary High School in Rutherford, is inspired by the idea that nurses can help people "at their lowest" and their most vulnerable moments.

"Nurses show immense courage to work in dangerous conditions and settings to help others," she said.



Dudkevych plans to attend Felician University this fall and hopes to become a nurse practitioner.

Her main goal is to work with other dedicated medical professionals to provide her patients with the best possible care. But medical care is just one part of nursing.

"[Nursing] encompasses resilience, empathy, and the power to make a tremendous difference in people's lives," she said. "Our purpose is to make the world better. I would have the opportunity not only to help people in hospital settings but also those around me."

Care and compassion are two skills that she plans to bring to wherever she finds herself.

She's also eager about the flexibility of nursing and the opportunity for her to be a lifelong learner. But there are other things that keep her grounded just as much.

"My faith and Ukrainian heritage will continue to play an important role in my future," she said, "because they remind me to stay strong, value family and community, and to work hard for my goals while helping those in need."

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Working in School

By Ariana Puzzo

Meet three hard-working Grand Saloon employees set to graduate from CHS later this month. They are Rian Pierce, Zury Guevara and Milena Bednarczyk. Bednarczyk discussed working at the Grand as part of her profile as a Top 10 Mustang on page 20. She also shared her plans to study Social Work on Fordham's Rose Hill campus. Here is a little more on Pierce and Guevara ...

Rian Pierce has worked at the Grand Saloon for a little over a year and a half, starting in September of 2024. He started as a bus boy and last June became a waiter. He typically works around five- to six-hour shifts on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday nights. He handles food, money, drinks and cleans the floors and tables.

"I'm actually pretty good at [balancing different parts of my life]," said Pierce, 18, who was also on the CHS bowling team. "It hasn't been as hard as I thought, and it's made me less nervous about what the future holds, knowing that I already have experience with time-balancing difficulties."

That will be a big help this fall as he matriculates at William Paterson University. He decided to study Nursing after he was inspired by his mother, Nicole Pierce, who works as an ER nurse at Hackensack Meridian Hospital.

Undecided on which part of nursing he'd like to do, he said: "What excites me the most about it is the obvious: helping people," said Pierce. "Doing the good that I can is basically the whole reason I've set myself on this path."

Zury Guevara said building work relationships and friendships is what made working at the Grand Saloon a truly enjoyable experience. Guevara began in October of 2024 as a busser, food runner, and hostess. The adults that she works with are "some of the best mentors and friends", and she appreciates getting closer with her classmates.

"Working with Rian and Mila has been awesome," said Guevara. "Having them as classmates already made the environment more comfortable, and we have definitely grown closer. It's been nice being able to work alongside



Milena Bednarczyk, Rian Pierce, Zury Guevara

people that I genuinely enjoy being around."

This September, Guevara will attend Montclair State University and enter a program that allows her to gain admission into Rutgers School of Dental Medicine if she maintains a high GPA and completes the prerequisite courses. Other influences on her decision were "generous financial aid and scholarships" and the ability to stay close to home with friends who will also attend the university.

In five years time, she sees herself continuing her journey toward becoming a dentist and hopes that she will already be attending dental school.

"I know that I will still have more schooling ahead of me, but I'm excited for the process and everything that I will continue learning along the way," said Guevara, 18. "While pursuing my academics, I would also like to work my way up to becoming a bartender."

Working in the restaurant industry has allowed her to become more outgoing and confident, as well as proficient with her multitasking and time management skills. The weeks when Guevara needed to pick up extra shifts taught her how to stay organized while also communicating with her teachers and managers.

It's a fast-paced environment, but she likes that and connections that you make with people. "I'm excited to continue meeting new people, gain real-world experience, and work toward a career where I can help others and make a positive impact on people's lives," said Guevara.

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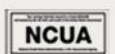


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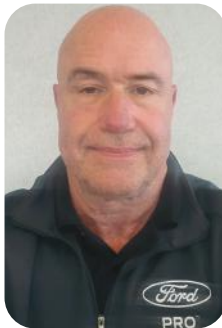


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Clifton Kid to Cosmetologist

You cannot make up Victoria Hidalgo's commitment to establishing herself in a career that offers long-term growth and independence. That's exactly what the CHS Co-Op student plans to do by entering the cosmetology industry.

In September, she'll keep working and saving money while preparing to pursue beauty school. It is a path that she was inspired to take by watching her older sister's successes.

"My sister Elizabeth (CHS 2019) is my biggest inspiration. She is an esthetician with a successful lash business who inspired me to also work in the beauty field," said Hidalgo, 17. "Not as an esthetician, but as a cosmetologist."

"I chose this path, because it aligns with my interests in skincare, creativity, and working hands-on with clients," she continued. "I wanted a career that offers long-term growth and independence."

But she's already begun growing. Hidalgo participated in CHS' Cooperative Education program, working as an intern at Marchionda & Ferrer, P.A., located at 950 Clif-



CHS senior Julia O'Neil plans to be a dental hygienist. She chose the dental field, because she can work as a dental assistant within a year after graduating CHS. Then, she can pursue her dental hygiene degree. "Most importantly," she said about her career goals, "it's a job that will not be replaced by AI." She is pictured with Cynthia Kester who always knows her favorite ice cream. "Working at Carvel has taught me patience. I deal with customers as they look and decide what they and their kids want. It takes time. It also helped me with time management, because I balance school and dance at CHS and Prestige Academy."

ton Ave. Hidalgo helps the team of accountants with scanning, filing, and organizing the documents and files in a precise and organized fashion.

"This role has helped me gain experience in a professional office environment," she said, "and also strengthened my attention to detail, responsibility, and organization skills."

The Co-Op program has given her the opportunity to see how balancing academics and a job requires "mental strength, discipline, and organization." Hidalgo believes that she has not only grown personally, but she is now prepared for any future challenges.

"I've gotten better at managing my time more effectively and learned to stay focused while balancing everything," she said.



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Supporting children and providing them with a safe environment is what Olivia Panek does daily as part of CHS Cooperative Education program and what she plans to keep doing in her career.

Panek works with owner Priscilla Alvarez of The Learning Studio, caring for children, aged from a couple months old to 5. Her responsibilities include helping supervise students, assisting with activities, and organizing the classroom — all while ensuring the children feel safe and encouraged throughout the day.

Working in School

“I also help students stay focused, complete tasks, and build confidence,” said Panek, 17. “This experience] has shown me how important it is to create a positive environment where kids feel supported and understood.”

The Co-Op program combines classroom-based education with practical paid work experience, teaching Panek to hone time management so that she could balance her job with schoolwork and CHS Wrestling.



Owner Priscilla Alvarez and Olivia Panek.

“Wrestling has taught me discipline, dedication, and how to push myself when things get difficult,” she said. “Many times I had to put schoolwork and responsibilities before free time, which has helped me become more focused and mature.”

Panek said she is more independent and equipped at handling pressure, useful skills she’ll use at County College of Morris, the first step in her goal to become a pediatric nurse.

“I always enjoy helping others, and I want a career where I can make a difference in people’s lives,” said Panek. “I knew I wanted to work in healthcare, but I was especially drawn to working with children, because I enjoy being around kids and helping them feel safe and comfortable.”

Having patience and showing care and understanding are qualities in her daily life. They’re also qualities that she believes are essential in pediatric nursing, more so when children are frightened in a medical setting.

“Seeing how much nurses can impact both patients and their families inspired me to look into this career,” said Panek. “I want to be someone who not only provides medical care but also emotional comfort.”

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1,257 Volunteer Hours



Volunteering through the Key Club, eight Mustangs learned that the key to life is found in giving. We asked them what they learned as volunteers, what brought them the most joy, and who they consider to be their unsung hero.

Daisy Zuniga (317.5 service hours)

By working with Schools 5 and 17, in the program K-Kids, other members and I worked on collecting food cans, painting seashells for Ocean Of Love, and creating pins for teacher appreciation. I believe by starting service at a young age and planting that seed, we'll see incredible growth in our community. Working with kids has shown me what service is truly about: what we act on. I could not have done all of this without School 17's Media Specialist Dr. Catherine Chidiac. She stayed with me, planned meetings, and supported all of my wild ideas for the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life and the Color Runs for School 17. Her dedication to the Clifton community truly makes her an unsung hero.

Maura Coleman (206.5 service hours)

After accumulating over 120 hours of service to the Clifton community and being recognized on a local, state, and national level for my career in service, I realize I couldn't have done it without the support of my friend and fellow Executive Board member, Krupa Jariwala (CHS 2027). Krupa has always led with care and grace and pushed herself to her fullest, aiming to bring up others with her. Krupa is my unsung hero, and I hope to see her future flourish, because her effort shouldn't go unnoticed.

Brianny Lopez Torres (205 service hours)

Helping create fun community events like the Family Camp Out at Albion Park and the Daddy-Daughter Dance was meaningful because it brought people together and created special memories. I worked with Daisy Zuniga and I really admire her dedication and teamwork as this year's vice president. She is my unsung hero, because she always works hard behind the scenes to help make every event successful.



Key Club President Maura Coleman and VP Daisy Zuniga.

Jason Molina (202.25 service hours)

Volunteering and supporting other people beyond CHS is a major source of pride. Being able to help others, positively impact, and cheering others has taught me respect, responsibility, leadership and, most importantly, caring for others. I worked closely with Fahmid Aftab who constantly helped me when I joined Key Club sophomore year. He helped me understand that Key Club is just more than a club. He motivated me to keep working hard in Key Club and was a really good leader.

David Perez (115 service hours)

I'm most proud of the community service that I've been a part over the past four years like senior citizen events, the Clifton Independence Celebration and school tricky trays. My unsung hero is probably my mom. She has always been supportive of the things that I have done over the years and encourages my future aspirations.



Brianny Lopez Torres, Jason Molina, David Perez, Karoline Ferrada, Yareli Molina, Alexis Alonso.

Karoline Ferrada (83.5 service hours)

I'm most proud of helping elderly members become more comfortable with technology. Helping them use their phones, get online, and teaching them how to stay connected was memorable. I enjoyed being able to make everyday tasks less stressful for them. It was rewarding to see how something small could make such a big difference in their independence. Through this experience, Ms. Turk always exhibited patience, kindness, and a genuine willingness to help others, which inspired me to do the same.

Yareli Molina (83 service hours)

Seeing smiles on kids and their parents' faces definitely made me realize how important it is to be involved. My unsung hero is Brianny Lopez. She is one of my closest friends and a huge inspiration to me and others. Hard

working and dedicated, her passion for helping the community is super contagious. She constantly motivates those around her to push themselves, work harder, and always gives a helping hand. Working alongside Brianny has shown me the importance of leadership, kindness, and service, and I am so grateful for the influence that she has had on both my life and our community.

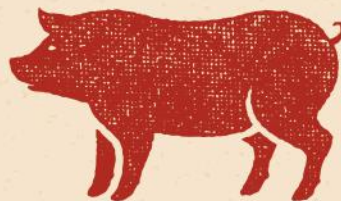
Alexis Alonso (44.5 service hours)

Giving back to the community in Key Club alongside people who genuinely care about helping others always felt rewarding since we were making a positive impact, even in small ways. I especially admire Ms. Turk for her dedication and hard work behind the scenes. She was always willing to help without expecting recognition and truly is an unsung hero to me.



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Music

A Path to Her American Dream

Story by Linda Telesco
Photo by John O'Boyle

When Clifton resident **Thais Maurera Suarez** stepped up to the microphone at PCCC's 54th Commencement ceremony on May 20 to lead the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the National Anthem, it was an affirmation of what the American Dream still means in this 250th anniversary year of our nation.

Thais graduated on May 20, receiving an AAS degree in Music Technology, with highest honors, a perfect GPA of 4.0, and the prospect of fulfilling a dream that was nearly crushed.

"I am a proud Venezuelan immigrant who came to the United States to make my dreams come true," she told the audience. "A decade ago, I had to flee for my life with a thousand dollars I borrowed and no plans except to start a new life here."

She left behind family and missed what would have been her first college graduation to fulfill her dream "to one day stand on the stage of the Grammy awards," a comment that inspired enthusiastic applause.

Thais led the Pledge of Allegiance, then, along with a fellow music technology graduate and student, sang the Star Spangled Banner, in a musical arrangement they created themselves, accompanied on guitar by music professor Chandler Carpenter.

Thais always loved music and plays piano, but she never wanted to be a performer. "I get terrible stage fright," she confessed. She was, in fact, drawn to music production and all the elements that create a full musical experience. "I was mostly inspired by the Disney films and the way music tells the story." Her favorite is *The Little Mermaid*.

In Venezuela, the university where Thais could pur-



Thais Maurera Suarez sings the National Anthem with Aaron Galloza, Linel Flores, and all of PCCC's Music Technology program.

sue her musical passion was in Caracas, a distance from her home. "The political environment was unsafe and my mother didn't want me to be so far away," she explained.

Thais enrolled at a nearby university and majored in journalism. "I always liked research and investigation," she said, so journalism seemed a good fit.

But because of her focus on journalism and her political activism, Thais was targeted by the authorities. "I started getting threats and wanted to hold out until graduation, but it wasn't safe for me anymore."

She and her partner, Mariana, left the country and stayed in Florida with Thais' aunt, eventually moving to New York where Thais explored the vibrant music scene. "This is where I'm supposed to be," she realized.

But Thais never forgot her grandfather's advice. "To really be successful, you need an education."

By 2023, Thais had become a Clifton resident and enrolled at PCCC. "My experience at PCCC has been positive through and through." She liked that the class sizes allowed for more engagement among students and with professors.

"I really appreciate that my main music professors all work in their field, so students know we are getting real advice from them."

Throughout her time at PCCC, Thais worked as a food and beverage manager for a hotel in Hoboken. “I almost left the job to focus on school, but my boss challenged me to be the best I could be at both,” she said. “I’m glad I stayed. I learned what I am really capable of.”

Thais plans to transfer to Montclair State University or William Paterson University to continue music education.

“I think the ideal career for me would be to work in music production, composing music for film and TV, and maybe also writing scripts and directing.” Her favorite band is ABBA, and the music artist she most admires is the British singer/songwriter, Adele. “I don’t know any other woman as fearless as she is who broke all the rules and was as successful.”

Other artists who influence her are the composers for film John Williams and Hans Zimmer, as well as composer and producer Quincy Jones. “They are all so well educated. That’s why I think education helps you to succeed.”

Most of Thais’ family now also live in the United States. “When I left Venezuela, I wondered if I would ever see them again,” she says.

Thais and Mariana have married and, in addition to their professional lives, they help Thais’ brother, Francisco, to care for his toddler son, Lucas.

“One thing I have learned over the years is resilience,” says Thais. “And one piece of advice I would give to other students is to advocate for yourself.”

Thais has expanded her American Dream. “I want to be an EGOT winner,” she says, using the acronym that represents someone who has won the Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony, all the major awards for television, music, film, and theater.

“Now that I put that goal out there,” says Thais, “I am committed to achieving it.”

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The Hamilton House

A House That Moved Through Time

Story by Joe Torelli

When the yellow school bus pulled into the parking lot of the Hamilton-Van Wagoner House museum on a spring morning in 2006, there were 27 third-graders from School 12 eager to experience more than 200 years of local history on a tour of the 18th century gambrel-roofed homestead, located at 971 Valley Rd..

And experience it they did, thanks to generations of volunteers and the late Norma Smith, the museum's curator who had a passion for sharing local history with her visitors. Which is what John Biegel and other present-day volunteers hope to revitalize this month.

After years of uncertainty, temporary closures, and different hands overseeing the museum, Clifton's Health and Human Services will reopen the Hamilton House on Flag Day, June 14, from about 11 am to 3 pm. To become a Board member for the Hamilton House, call Clifton Health Dept. at 973-470-5758.

Or learn its history in the updated version of a story that was published in Clifton Merchant's July 2006 edition ...

For the next three hours, she held the third graders and their chaperones spellbound, delighting them with tales of the home's former occupants. She showed them dozens



March 4, 1980: The Van Wagoner-Hamilton House was relocated by truck from the Notch on Valley Rd. and moved a few hundred feet up the street to its present location at Surgent Park. These days, the Hamilton House at 971 Valley Rd. is Clifton's living history museum and will be open for tours in June.

of authentic artifacts from its past and engaged some of them in hands-on demonstrations of that era's everyday life while dressed in costumes.

The students were visiting under a program sponsored by the Clifton Board of Education that sent every third-grade class to the museum each year as part of its curriculum on civics and local history. Until recent years,

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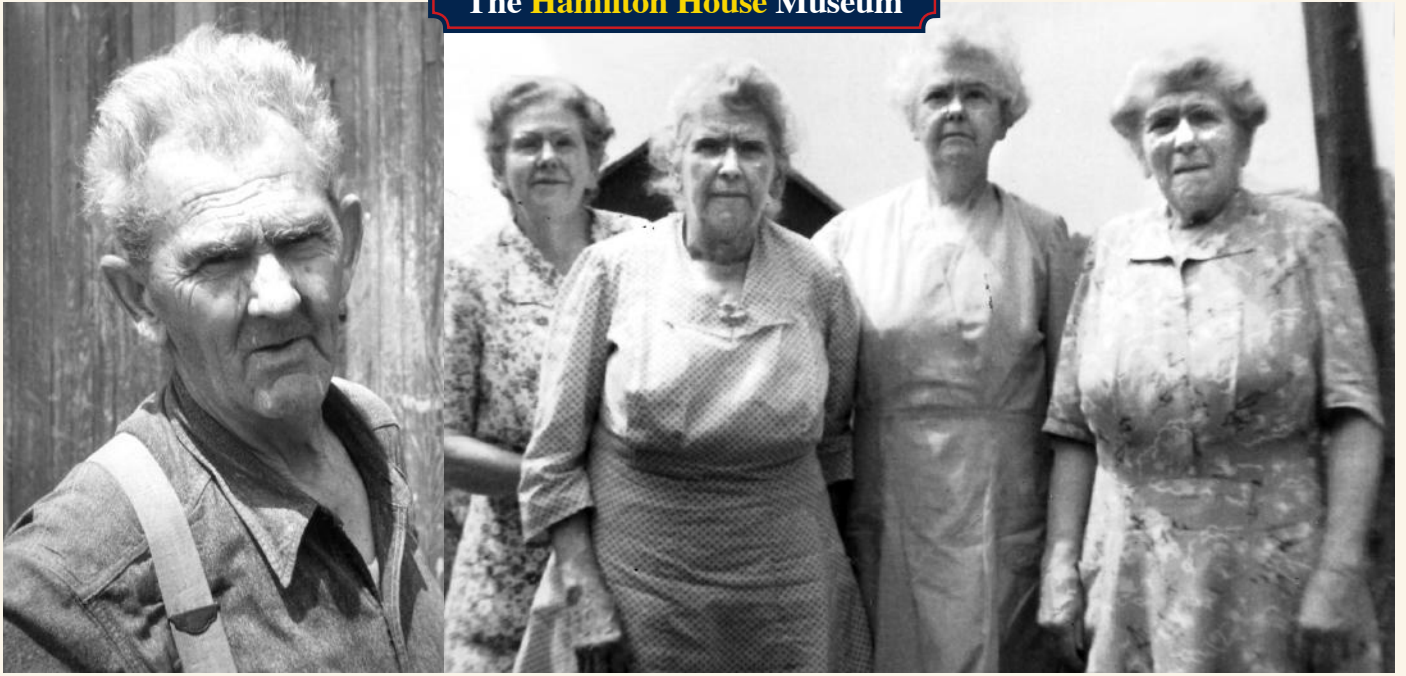
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Built in 1817 by Anna and John Vreeland, in the Notch, west of today's Valley Rd., the Hamilton House was purchased in 1856 by Henry Hamilton and remained in that family until 1972, upon the death of their son, Harry, shown left. Pictured at right are Harry's sisters, Laura (1882-1955), Emma (1873-1955), Clara (1877-1967), and Addie (1875-1957), who also owned and resided in the Hamilton House from 1928 until their deaths, prior to Harry.

students got to experience first-hand what it was like to live there in the 18th and 19th centuries, rather than just reading about it in books.

Except, the Hamilton Van-Wagoner house was scheduled to be razed 54 years ago when Harry Hamilton passed away at age 92. Up until that time, three generations of Hamiltons had called it home for more than 100 years.

But Harry had stipulated in his will that the house was to be torn down, or moved, before the property on which it stood could be sold to anyone outside the family.

From most accounts, Harry was a strong-willed, fiercely independent man. His only offspring, daughter Caroline, admitted that he was “impulsive,” and “a character from his early days on” who loved the land and its history, especially around the Notch area where the house stood.

So, it surprised few people that his will called for the demolition of the homestead. Family friend and lifelong resident, the late Walter Van Leeuwen, recalled how many people considered Harry an oddball — a strange man from a strange family that had a reputation for keeping to itself.

According to an 88-year-old Van Leeuwen, Harry inherited the house from his spinster sister, Clara, who had owned it along with three other unmarried sisters. They had inherited it from their spinster aunt, Susan, who had lived there with her two unmarried sisters, Bridget and Margaret.

“Most people thought the Hamiltons were peculiar and unfriendly because the women never seemed to marry and none of them socialized much,” said Van Leeuwen in 2006. “And they were constantly saying how Harry always seemed irritable and didn’t trust anybody.”

But Van Leeuwen knew differently. His parents, immigrants from Holland, settled in Clifton in 1921. They leased four acres of property from the Hamiltons on land adjacent to their house. Today, that property is a parking lot for Dante’s, previously Alexis Steakhouse & Tavern.

“Aunt Susie was always real nice to us,” said Van Leeuwen, referring to owner Susan Hamilton, recalling one extraordinary act of kindness after his father, Seiman Van Leeuwen, was killed in a tragic automobile fire in 1925.

“My mother was suddenly a widow with five small children and no one to help pay the lease. So Aunt Susie deeded all four acres to her for a single dollar. Imagine that,” said Van Leeuwen, in a voice awed over 80 years later.

“After my father died, Harry became a second father to me and my four sisters,” he continued, insisting that stories of Hamilton’s quarrelsome nature and his mistrust of others are greatly exaggerated. To emphasize his point, Van Leeuwen told of how Harry and Blanche (Harry’s wife) ran a farm stand on Valley Rd. that they left unattended much of the time.



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SUNDAY, JUNE 28, 2026 11AM-3PM



The Hamilton House Museum

“Customers would come, take what they wanted, and leave the money in a box on the table,” he said. “Harry never questioned their honesty. Now, why would he do that if he didn’t trust people?”

Van Leeuwen, who remained a friend and confidante to Hamilton until the day Harry died, said that he was not surprised by the will’s stipulation.

“Harry loved farming, and he was attached to that property,” he said. “I guess when the land finally left the family, he wanted the house to go with it.”

When word of Harry’s death reached the fledgling Clifton Historical Commission, they went to the Council seeking help to save and turn it into a museum. Becker and Becker Associates, the local business that purchased the property and its buildings from the Hamilton estate, presented the farmhouse to the Commission. One year later, the Hamilton-Van Wagoner House was lifted from its foundation on the Hamilton property and transported several hundred yards across Valley Rd. to its location in city-owned Surgent Park.



Photographed in July 2006, Walter Van Leeuwen, then an 88-year-old Clifton resident, who recalled Harry Hamilton as a second father.

Harry’s will was honored, and Clifton saved an irreplaceable treasure.

By 2006, the house was maintained jointly by the Hamilton Van-Wagoner House Restoration Association, which cared for the buildings and furnishings, and the city, which maintained the grounds. It grew into more than a museum where visitors came to view relics from the past.

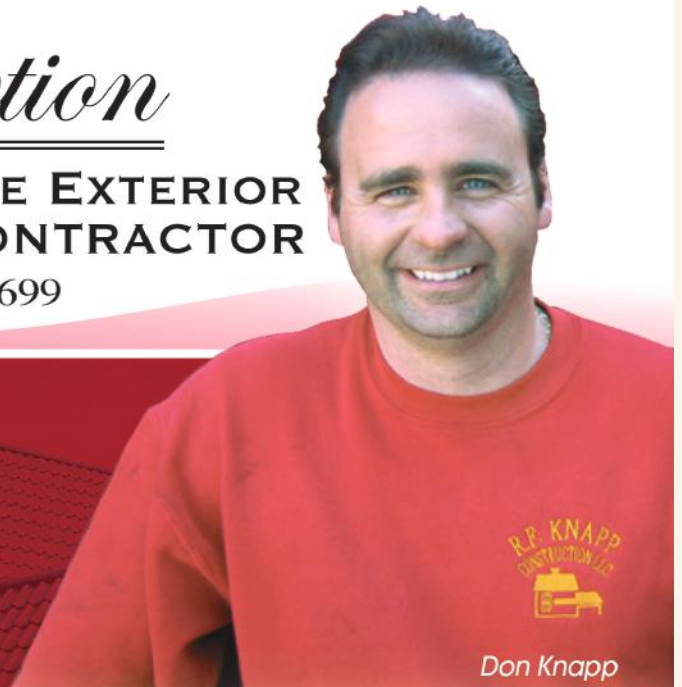
Thanks to Smith and her predecessors, curators Elvira Hessler, Jule Olczak and Gen Generalli, along with the museum’s Board of Directors and volunteers, there were programs, events, and opportunities for anyone who had an appreciation for Clifton history and art.

The COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on touring and programming. But John Biegel, who is the Director of Health and Human Services, has worked closely in the past several years with the Passaic County Department of Cultural & Historic Affairs.

The two parties maintained a Shared Services Agree-

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The Hamilton House Museum



From left, curators of the Hamilton House: Elvira (Deleacaes) Hessler, Jule Olczak, Gen Generalli and Norma Smith.

ment until early 2025 when they went to the Council to inquire whether the city would forgo open space funding for several years as a way to upgrade the Hamilton House.

“The county had nice architectural plans to update it into a real museum,” said Biegel. “Kelly Ruffel, who is the Director of Cultural & Historic Affairs, is a true professional.”

“But the Council decided not to do it so the agreement with the county stopped at that time,” said Biegel. “Right now, there’s no money set aside in the budget for the

Hamilton House. The House pretty much closed for the year.” But there were leftover funds from past donations that the Board’s nonprofit never utilized. The thought is it’ll open every other month for visitation. Biegel is also thinking ahead to the holiday season, which is when the Hamilton House previously hosted CHS’ Madrigals.

“With it being the 250th birthday of the country, I couldn’t see it just sitting there,” said Biegel. “We have this historic house, and it felt like an obligation to open it for at least three days.”



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Memorial Day in Clifton



We Remembered on Monday, May 25, 2026

Memorial Day is when America remembers those who died while serving our nation. Services were held at the Brighton Rd Firehouse and the Athenia Vets post. At the Avenue of Flags and in Downtown Clifton, Councilman Tony Latona—a soon-to-be retired US Air Force Master Chief—delivered comments. He recalled the 283 Cliftonites who served in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War and never came home. Their names are enscribed on the Memorial Monument. Here are photos from the day.



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We Remembered on Monday, May 25, 2026



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HONORING OUR FATHERS

By Tom Hawrylko

On Memorial Day, I wear my dad's veteran's hat. Washed out sky blue, it is trimmed with yellow and stitched with these words: Amer. Ukr. Veterans.

Decades after his death, his hat and our shared pride in our service, plus our family and Ukrainian heritage, is the legacy that links us. So please allow me to honor Joe Hawrylko—and all the dads for Father's Day 2026—with a tribute to his brief time on our earth.

Joe was 29 when he enlisted for WWII. While still in boot camp in Fort Dix, Joe's sister Olga insisted he meet a young Hungarian girl who Olga worked with in the Perth Amboy garment factories, Julia Karockay.

A few dates and things got serious. They corresponded during the war but Julia, always practical, would not accept his proposal until he returned home in one piece.

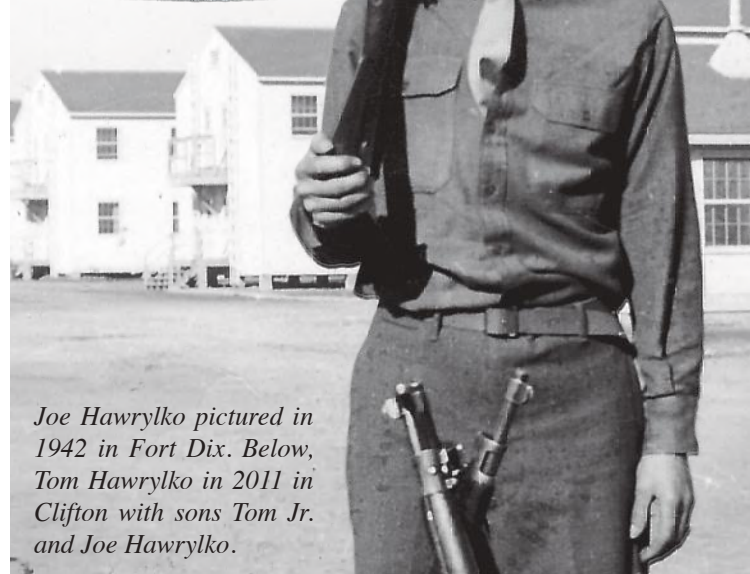
In Europe, Joe saw war close up and while there are no official citations of his service, he is mentioned in one book as one of the "best combat soldiers in D company" who was recruited for some specific tough work.

It was my son Joseph, who was named for his grandfather, who found that item in the book *Omaha Beach and Beyond* while doing research on our family name.

Julia and Joe married on May 27, 1947, in our Ukrainian Assumption Church. In 1961, they used the G.I. Bill and purchased their first home at 360 Ashley St. in the Budapest section of Perth Amboy. Like many men from the church, Joe worked in the refineries, mixing and loading fuels, tying up ships. He and Julie were living the American Dream, owning a home, paying for my Catholic schooling and saving for their three kids to go to college.

But things changed for Joe and Julie in 1969 when he was forced to retire from Hess Oil, due to what one doctor called shell shock from his war years. When Joe first got sick, Julia went from managing Mickey's Donuts in the Two Guys store in Hopelawn to being a full time caretaker.

For six years, Joe slowly faded from Alzheimer's disease until his demise at age 63. By then in 1976, I was in



Joe Hawrylko pictured in 1942 in Fort Dix. Below, Tom Hawrylko in 2011 in Clifton with sons Tom Jr. and Joe Hawrylko.



the Navy, stationed in California and made it home on the third day of his wake to see him buried.

In his final years, dad lost his ability to speak. So I'd like to imagine what his last words would have been to my siblings Elaine and Johnny: "Make mom and I proud, go have children, live well, and carry on our names."

And I think that's what we all did.

Paraprofessional of the Year

By Ariana Puzzo

It's hard to surprise Janette (Giardina) Hughes after 19 years as a paraprofessional, but she didn't anticipate a FaceTime call that she got earlier this year while in the doctor's office.

Much to her doctor's amusement, she explained that she needed to answer the call. That was when she learned that she is the Clifton Education Association's Paraprofessional of the Year.

"All the kids were lined up yelling, 'Congratulations!' and they had signs. It was very special," said Hughes, 65. "When I came back [to work] ... they took me to the Media Center, where [Principal Ahmad Hamdeh] and Mike Rogers gave me my plaque and [spoke]. Then I walked back to my classroom, and it was full of my family and teachers."

Hughes admitted that it overwhelmed her and that she had "no idea what a big deal this was" between the dinner and the recognition. But a love for the students is the throughline for each experience that she's had during her career at CHS. Hughes spent 15 years in a Behavioral classroom and the past four years in an Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) classroom.

"Working with some of our most vulnerable students requires a strong sense of empathy and a humanistic perspective," said Michael Rogers, the 2025 CEA's Teacher of the Year. "Regardless of the challenges or obstacles, Nettie consistently brings her resilience to the classroom."

That admiration cuts both ways and is why Hughes has remained in Clifton both professionally and as a resident. She and husband Gary (CHS 1979) wed in 1985 and raised their son, Tyler (CHS 2012), in our city.

It's a community full of bonds, like the one that she developed with her kindergarten best friend Beth (Richardson) Steinfeldt (CHS 1979). Hughes and Steinfeldt grew up down the street from each other in Allwood, and remain that way today, and are godmothers to each other's children.

"Clifton has a lot to offer," said Hughes.



Janette Hughes with son Tyler and husband Gary.



Legacies and Life Skills

It might be said that Hughes' background prepared her for a hard day's work.

Born to parents Frank and Marie Giardina, Hughes is the third of five children and only girl. Her brothers are John (CHS 1969), Gary (CHS 1976), Frank (CHS 1982), and Michael (CHS 1989). Her father owned and operated the Maple Valley Liquor Store for 42 years and was a member and Treasurer of the Deriter Club of Clifton.

The Giardinis are also known as a "big police family." Brother Gary was the Clifton Police Chief from 2010 to 2014, also serving as Passaic County Undersheriff and then Acting Sheriff until the 2024 election. He is now the Director of the Passaic County Police Academy.

Hughes' brother Frank is a retired Clifton cop, husband Gary is a retired Passaic County Sheriff Officer, and her mother Marie worked for Clifton's Records Bureau for years. Today, nephew Gary is a lieutenant in Clifton and Tyler is a dispatcher in the Passaic County Sheriff's Office.

Suffice it to say, Hughes felt confident early on that she could work with older students.

"I just enjoy [them and] relate better to them," she explained. "I grew up with four brothers ... and I was right in the middle of all of them. I had to hold my own."

Hughes attended School 9 and CCJH before graduating with the Class of 1979. She took the secretarial route and entered the workforce, working at Cupo Realty.

Later, Hughes worked for a medical book publisher in Secaucus and in litigation support. As the Rochelle Park office prepared to close, she determined that she didn't want to commute into the city. That's when she learned about a paraprofessional job opportunity.

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Paraprofessional of the Year



From left, at the Clifton Education Association Awards Dinner, nephew Gary and wife Tara Giardina, brother Gary Giardina and sister-in-law Cindy, son Tyler, Janette, husband Gary, sister-in-law Giovanna, brother Michael Giardina, sister-in-law Kerry Hughes. Missing are brother John and sister-in-law Christine and brother Frank. Below, Janette Giardina CHS 1979.

“I applied and got the job,” said Hughes. “Nineteen years later, I still love it.”

Even in a familiar environment, it was a new experience. Mentors at the time, like current Assistant Superintendent Mark Gengaro and WWMS Principal Andrew Jaeger, showed her what she needed to do.

“I went in blind, not really knowing what a paraprofessional did, and they took me right under their wings,” said Hughes. “You couldn’t ask for better mentors. They showed me the ropes, especially in the Behavioral classes, because it was rough. I learned everything from them.”

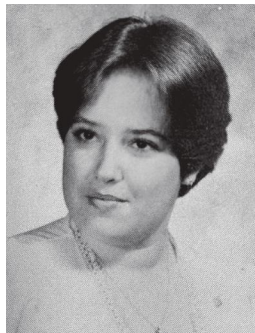
Today, Hughes is both a classroom and one-on-one paraprofessional. Her classroom teacher is Laurie Jaeger, who is Andrew’s wife in full-circle twist, and there are five paraprofessionals who rotate between six male students each day.

The day begins with a morning meeting before a Special Education English teacher comes into the classroom for Second Period. Third Period is when they document the students’ progress in reading and math. Next comes Art, Lunch, and then Gym before Life Skills in Seventh Period.

“We have different sections set up where they do all sorts of things,” said Hughes. “They learn to fold clothes and make sandwiches. ... We do food shopping in the classroom. Any life skills that they need to know.”

Loving What She Does

Supporting teachers is just as important as working with the students — and it’s a dynamic that Hughes acknowl-



edged isn’t easy to explain.

“Unless you’re in there, you really don’t know how much you do ... [but] everybody should try it once,” said Hughes. “It is probably not for everybody, but the way you feel at the end of the day — you meant something to these kids.”

When she was in the Behavioral classroom, she felt like she gained another family. There were kids who “didn’t know what a family was”, so they strove to provide that unit for them. There are unfortunately instances where a student didn’t survive, but there are also joyous reunions.

“A lot of them from years back still keep in touch with us and send us pictures of their kids,” said Hughes. One morning during bus duty, a parent shouted “Ms. Nettie” and she turned, confused, because parents don’t use her nickname. “It was a former student dropping her freshman off for high school,” she laughed. “That was exciting.”

From greeting students at the start of the day to watching them grow and excel throughout the year, Hughes finds it all rewarding. Some of the students started the school year as nonverbal and are now speaking. Others used to wear headphones all day but no longer need it.

Hughes is also involved with Unified Sports and the Unified Talent Show, where the students get an opportunity to play against other schools and showcase their talents to family and friends.

“They’re just special,” said Hughes. “Everyone asks me, ‘When are you going to retire?’ I ask, ‘Why?’ When you love what you do, why would you retire?”



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Great Futures Golf Classic - October 19

A Taste of Clifton Food & Wine Festival - October 26

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MHOLDEN@BGCCLIFTON.ORG OR 973-773-0966 X155



Columbia Bank in Botany Plaza hosted a meet and greet on April 30. Branch manager Riddhi Sodagar, at center in the blue dress, and Assistant Manager Margaret Liguori-Lancia, to her left, said, “The idea is to connect friends, neighbors and clients,” said Sodagar. She added that on June 13, from 10 am to noon, the public is invited to an open house and ribbon cutting.

The Philippines 128th Independence Day will be marked with a flag raising at City Hall on June 13 at 11 am. Afterwards, attend a reception with Filipino food and entertainment at Lifepoint Community Church, 308 Burgess Pl., noted Bong Bunagan, who can be reached at 551-486-7368.

Clifton Rec’s Citywide Garage Sale is June 5-7 from 9 am to 6 pm. Visit cliftonrec.com for a list of sale addresses.

Clifton Arts Center and the New Jersey Symphony will celebrate America’s 250th with a spirited string quartet performance of patriotic favorites on June 12, 7 pm at the CAC. Tickets are \$30; \$25 for groups of five or more or \$10 for kids 12 and under. Go to cliftonartscenter.org or call 973-472-5499. Cash or check accepted.

Friends of Clifton Public Library welcome Richard Stillman on June 13, 2:30 pm at Main Memorial Library. The actor, musician, singer, storyteller, and tap dancer will perform a patriotic tribute. Questions? Write to MembershipFRIENDSofCPL@gmail.com.

Clifton Early Learner Academy’s Touch-a-Truck Family Fun Day is June 13, 10 am to 2 pm, 290 Brighton Rd. The free event is in collaboration with the Clifton Education Foundation. Bring food items to support St. Peter Haven. Character meet and greet, music, games, crafts. Food and beverage available for purchase. Info and registration for Clifton Public Schools free Preschool program.

On June 11, Rosemary Trinkle Baran will be inducted into Fairleigh Dickinson University’s PINNACLE Society. A 1983 graduate of the Silberman School of Business at FDU, Baran concentrated in Hotel Management.



Baran’s career began and flourished in the hospitality industry, with leadership roles at Hilton and Hyatt Hotels. She specialized in acquisitions and hotel openings across the country.

Later, she shifted her focus to healthcare, joining New York Presbyterian Hospital, now there for over 20 years.

The Society recognizes distinguished and accomplished alumni. Each year, a committee selects alumni for their distinction in their chosen career field, contributions to society and humanity through public or humanitarian service, and/or outstanding service to the University.

The Clifton native also serves as a member of FDU’s Board of Trustees. She previously served as a member of the Alumni Association Board of Governors and is the immediate past President of the Board.

Here in Clifton, she and her family have long been involved in community affairs. Among them, Baran is a past president of the Board of Recreation and was the campaign manager for the late Councilwoman Lauren Murphy.

Clifton Behind the Scenes gives residents an inside look at how their city operates. Presented by ECHO, the next program is June 18 from 4-5:30 pm (in English), 5:30-7 pm (in Arabic), and 7-8:30 pm (in Spanish). Led by Councilwoman Rosemary Pino, the guided sessions at City Hall let residents learn about the roles and responsibilities of city departments. Future sessions: July 16, Aug. 20, Sept. 24. Learn more: echonj.org.

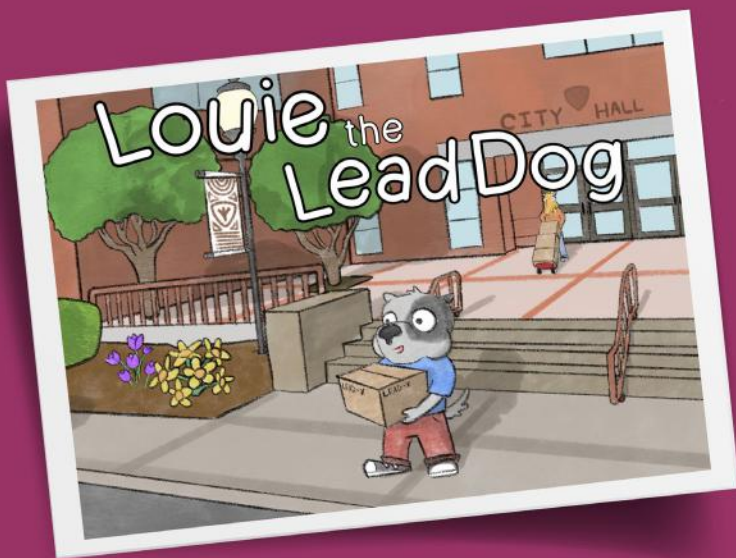
Passaic County's Outdoor Movie Night on July 9 is a free screening of "GOAT" at Weasel Brook Park, 1 Westervelt Pl., shortly after sunset (8:45 pm). Bring your own blankets, chairs, snacks, and drinks. To register or for other locations, visit PassaicCountyRec.org. The event series is funded by the Passaic County Board of County Commissioners.

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



On May 20, Strobles Outreach for Kingdom Kids cut the ribbon for the opening of their storefront at 1232 Van Houten Ave. Headed by Michelle Strobles and her family, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit serves those who were abused, neglected, or abandoned, as well as those aging out of foster care who may not have a stable support system. Call 973-495-1433, visit stroblesoutreachforkingdomkids.com, or email info@MOFKK.com.

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Check out the Clifton Health Department's first published book!

This children's book, called Louie the Lead Dog, teaches kids all about lead-based paint in a fun and easy-to-understand way. Through Louie's adventures, young readers learn important safety lessons about identifying and avoiding lead hazards at home.



Books are available for purchase for \$12.00 each. They are available online or in person at the Clifton Health Department.

Visit <https://www.cliftonnj.org/412/Lead-Division> for more information.





The 4th Annual Music at the Barns Outdoor Concert is June 14 at 3 pm and features the Clifton Community Band with Director Robert D. Morgan. Bring your own seating. Interested in joining the band? Write to cliftonband@optonline.net.

The JK Realty team reminds readers to mark July 16 as the firm presents Polka Legend Jimmy Sturr (at right) and His Orchestra at Passaic's Third Ward Park. The show starts at 7 pm with a guest appearance by the Chopin Singing Society. JK is also presenting the first-ever Clifton Day on July 11. It will be staged in their parking lot from 1 to 4 pm at 270 Colfax Ave. Those interested to find out how to help out or participate, call JK's Joseph Siano at 973-563-1449.

Clifton Rec's K-Pop Demon Hunters Camp is July 13-17 from 10 am to 1 pm at the Rec Center, 1232 Main Ave. Cost is \$160 per hunter. Open to ages 4-10. Experience slime noodles, games, cake pops, T-shirt designs, purple hair, and more. Questions? Register at cliftonrec.com. Call 973-470-5956.

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

Clifton's Relay for Life is June 6. At Relay for Life, team members walk or run on the Clifton Stadium track on June 6 to raise hope, funds and awareness for the services provided by the American Cancer Society. Details: cancer.org or at secure.acsevents.org.



St. Philip Primetimers' next bus trip to Resorts Casino in Atlantic City is June 23. Bus leaves St. Philip Drive at 9:30 am. Get on board! Advance tickets only; call Jean at 973-253-1619.

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

Clifton Rec is hiring Camp Counselors for July 6 to Aug. 14 to lead camp activities for kids ages 5-13. The job runs weekdays from 8:45 am to 3:45 pm. Email cliftonrec@cliftonnj.org for an application. Applicants must be 18+ and will have graduated high school as of June 2026. Additional required dates for CPR/First Aid staff training in June and camp supply clean-up in August.

Clifton Rec's Drive-In Movie is Aug. 4 (rain date: Aug. 11) at 8:45 pm or once it's dark enough to view Disney and Pixar's "Hoppers" at Main Memorial Park, Park Slope and Main Ave. The family event is sponsored by the Rec Dept. in cooperation with Clifton Against Substance Abuse and the Governor's Council Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Bring your beach blankets or lawn chairs. Snacks available for purchase. No alcoholic drinks or smoking.

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Birthdays & Celebrations - June 2026



Bob & Alice DeLiberto hit 39 years on June 27. **Frank and Brenda (Ludvik) Calandrillo** (CHS '76) are celebrating 42 years on June 2nd. **Bob & Carol Van Der Linda's** 65th anniversary is June 10. **Daniel Sotamba** turns 13 on June 30.



Michael and Marisol McIninch will celebrate their 36th anniversary on June 23. **Emma, Olivia & Victoria Green**, turn 20 on June 24. **Jace Park** turns 2 on June 5!



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- Karl Aponte 6/3
- Thomas Lesch..... 6/4
- Michael Musto 6/4
- Emma Nysk 6/5
- Brian Coleman 6/6
- Rob Cone 6/6
- Samantha Malenchak..... 6/6
- Koreana Sabo..... 6/8
- Robert Ciallella 6/9
- Ava Nicole Genardi 6/9
- Jaime Zapata-Rosas 6/9
- Larry Grasso..... 6/10
- Javier Pachas-Nemoto 6/10
- Joey Randazzo 6/10



Jill (Leonard) and Rich Meade
celebrate their 2nd wedding
anniversary on June 28.
Jill is CHS '07 and Rich is '03.

- Nicole Carreno..... 6/11
- Margaret Nysk..... 6/11
- Adam Soder..... 6/11
- Monica Baquerizo..... 6/13
- Cindy Brevic Goldstein..... 6/13
- Anna Jurgowski..... 6/13
- Christopher Stetz..... 6/13
- Christopher Zaccone..... 6/13
- Alexandra Scerbak..... 6/14
- Jennifer Liddle..... 6/15
- Andrew Bandurski..... 6/16
- Danielle Dvorak..... 6/16
- Derek Dvorak..... 6/16
- Stephanie Dvorak..... 6/16
- Jane Justin..... 6/16
- Kristina Marchesani..... 6/16
- Joseph Peterson..... 6/16
- Raymond Kuruc..... 6/18
- Rafelina Reyes..... 6/18
- Tabitha Sosa..... 6/18
- Jim Schubert Sr..... 6/18
- Aileen Haight..... 6/20
- Alexander Conklin..... 6/22
- Joseph Hrina..... 6/23
- Nella Baquerizo..... 6/24
- Jack DeVries..... 6/24



MaryAnn and Frank Duke,
celebrate their 61st anniversary
on June 26.

- Mike Skurski..... 6/24
- Brittany Martorella..... 6/25
- Connie Musleh..... 6/26
- Daniel Marriello..... 6/27
- Susan McDonald..... 6/27
- Walter Vladyka..... 6/27
- Marco Greco..... 6/28
- Kristen Murcko..... 6/28
- Mason Immersi..... 6/29
- Monica Szewczyk..... 6/29
- Robert Conklin..... 6/30
- Christopher Lucas..... 6/30

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Clifton Association of Artists' Spirit of America award winners, from left: Gloria Marino, Aneta Pierog-Sudol, Tom Dzubina, Mary Annie Viola, Joan Schessler, Mike Bertelli, Gloria Kosteka, Kayden Bevando, Michael Zaccheo, and Mayor Grabowski.

The Clifton Quilters Guild on June 27 at 2 pm at the Clifton Arts Center will present three Quilts of Valor to veterans Charles Binder, Tony Latona and Dr. Francis Mann. The presentation will open the exhibit Celebrate America Through Quilting in honor of America's 250th birth of the nation. The exhibit is displayed June 24 to Aug. 22. This group awards quilts to veterans annually. Binder served in

the US Coast Guard, Latona in the US Air Force and Mann in the US Army. Write cliftonqg@gmail.com for info.

Clifton Association of Artists' Spirit of America exhibit is displayed until June 13 on Wednesdays through Saturdays, 1-4 pm at the Clifton Arts Center, 900 Clifton Ave. Call 973-472-5499 or visit cliftonartscenter.org.

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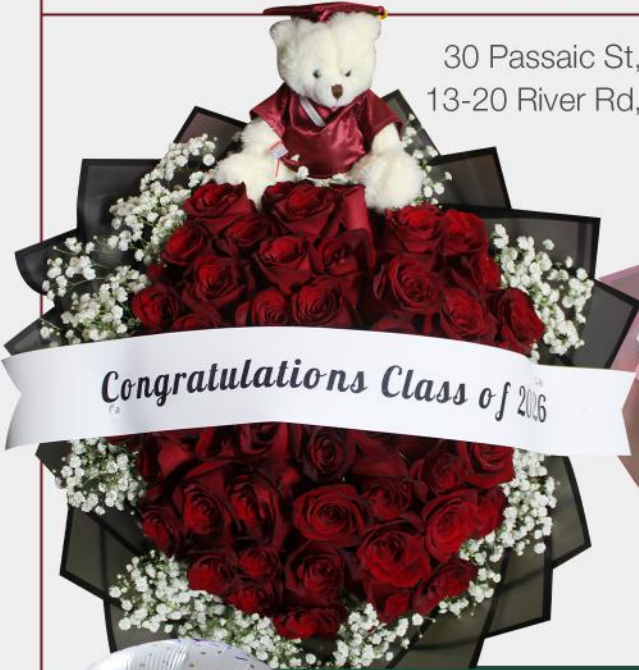


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