

# THE 2007 LIBERTY MEDALS

## TOP LOCAL HEROES VIE FOR LIBERTY MEDALS

October 17, 2007 -- Let's give them a big hand! The New York Post is delighted to announce the finalists for our sixth annual Liberty Medals, which honors the hometown heroes whose creativity, courage and kindness are the bedrock of the city.

Meet the unsung stars who epitomize the many selfless New Yorkers who go the extra mile for all of us, who protect us and enrich our lives with their spirit, ingenuity and compassion.

Tonight, 10 of these everyday heroes, selected as winners in each of 10 categories, will be saluted at a reception at The New York Academy of Sciences at 7 World Trade Center.

Popular TV host Regis Philbin will emcee the event.

The Post launched the Liberty Medals program after 9/11 when so many humble heroes came forward with out fanfare to help us heal.

This year, we again asked our readers to nominate fellow citizens who every day, in many ways, large and small, pitch in at schools, hospitals and in our neighborhood, to make our lives safer and richer.

You responded with nominations of people in all walks of life in the 10 categories, including Young Heart - for the youth under 17 who displayed tremendous resolve - Community and one each for our Finest, Bravest and educators.

This year's New York Post Liberty Medals program is supported by John Catsimatidis, chairman and CEO of Gristedes Supermarkets, a Red Apple Group company.

A distinguished panel of New Yorkers selected the winners from the short list of finalists who are profiled on our pages today.

The judges included Harvey Weinstein, co-chairman of the Weinstein Co.; Lloyd Williams, chairman of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce; Martha Nelson, group editor, Time Inc.; CUNY Chancellor Dr. Matthew Goldstein; Bruce Ratner, President and CEO of Forest City Ratner Companies; City Comptroller William Thompson; Police Commissioner Ray Kelly and Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta.

The winners will receive a Liberty Medal created for The Post by renowned graphic designer Milton Glaser, who devised the iconic "I LOVE NY" logo.

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### LEADERSHIP

*For compassionate, disciplined leadership in service of the common good.*

**Mary Bryant:** She's a stunning model, but when Mary Bryant heads to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to recruit wounded veterans for marathons, she's the picture of a gung-ho drill sergeant.

Bryant, vice president of New York's Achilles Track Club, which encourages the disabled to compete in sports, founded a program called Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans, to train soldiers hurt in Iraq and Afghanistan for marathons.

Since 2004, more than 300 disabled vets, including some who've "lost two or three limbs," have competed around the country on the Freedom Team, using wheelchairs or prosthetics.

**Nominator: Renee Landegger**

**Vincent Ferguson:** Fighting childhood obesity is a heavy lift, but Brooklyn bodybuilding buff Vincent Ferguson believes kids will keep active if they find a sport they love - so he introduces them to dozens at a time.

Ferguson, a personal trainer and computer operator, founded the nonprofit Body Sculpt of New York, which holds an annual free Children's Sports & Fitness Expo.

Volunteers at the expo teach the basics of nearly 30 activities, from archery to yoga. When the kids, ages 4 through 18, find one they'd like to pursue, they're told where in the city they can go to do so.

**Nominator: Dr. Karen Copeland**

**Sheikh Moussa Drammeh:** When two Bronx families lost 10 members, including nine children, in a horrific fire last March, Sheikh Moussa Drammeh was there for his community.

He was the survivors' spokesman and was instrumental in arranging their return to Mali for the heartbreaking burial.

Drammeh was no stranger to reaching out. He has been running his not-for-profit Adopt a Friend Inc. since 2001, as well as the private Islamic Leadership School, a parochial school that serves first grade through high school.

"He is one of the most vocal Muslim leaders against terrorism," said his wife, Shireena.

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**Nominator: Shireena Drammeh**

## **YOUNG HEART**

*For the youth under 17 who most impressively displayed adult resolve. This award is not for a physical feat, but for behavior that displays moral character or mature judgment.*

**Casey Casperino:** When New Jersey sixth-grader Casey Casperino told classmates she wanted to hold a school fund-raiser to benefit the National Kidney Foundation, a few didn't even know what kidneys are for.

"Some of the kids didn't know anything about why kidneys were important and about kidney disease," said Casey, 12, whose right kidney was removed when she was 10 years old as a result of the genetic disorder cystinuria.

This past spring's fund-raiser at Christopher Columbus Middle School in Clifton raised more than \$1,400 for the National Kidney Foundation of Greater New York.

**Nominator: Verena Huettener**

**Avery Hairston:** When Avery Hairston heard Al Gore talk about global warming, he saw the light - and now the 15-year-old East Sider aims to turn New Yorkers on to energy-saving light bulbs.

Last spring, as a freshman at the Collegiate School, he founded RelightNY, an environmental group, with a team of "equally dedicated" classmates who raise money to buy compact fluorescent bulbs, then donate them to low-income families.

Avery hopes to spread the word to all New Yorkers that CFL bulbs cost more to buy than traditional ones, "but, long term, save you money because they use less energy."

**Nominator: Bob Jeffrey**

**Jourdan Urbach:** Fifteen-year-old high-school junior Jourdan Urbach is a nonstop dynamo.

He's a violin virtuoso who, at age 7, founded Children Helping Children, a musical charity which has raised \$1.3 million toward medical research and to help hospitals create music-therapy programs.

The Roslyn Heights, L.I., teen has also written two books, performed at concert halls around the United States and done research on multiple sclerosis.

He's looking at a career in neuroscience and neurology.

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**Nominator: Daniel Jamieson**

## **EDUCATOR**

*For an administrator or teacher who excels at preparing the next generation of New Yorkers for their future challenges.*

**JoAnne Raffaele:** Queens computer-technology teacher JoAnne Raffaele takes her students on virtual field trips to places like the Louvre museum in Paris, painting them a vivid picture of how a zest for learning - and caring about others - can get them anywhere.

Raffaele, who teaches sixth through eighth grades at PS/MS 207 in Howard Beach, teaches student teams to create interactive educational Web sites on such crucial issues as world hunger, global warming, poverty and obesity.

“I want the children to learn to work cooperatively, think critically ... and how to solve world problems.”

**Nominator: Frank Raffaele**

**Steven Kaye:** Brooklyn science teacher Steven Kaye’s favorite project is opening doors.

Kaye, an earth-science and science-research teacher at James Madison HS since 1984, is passionate about getting his research students a chance to do volunteer work at college, hospital or professional labs over the summer.

“I pull strings or I beg. I say, ‘Do you have a lab spot for a really good student?’ ” said Kaye, whose students have participated in prestigious competitions, including the Intel Science Talent Search.

According to one former student, Kaye has “dedicated his entire life to delivering students to their dreams.”

**Nominator: Ella Malamud**

**Ronald Gorsky:** Don’t tell Harry Potter, but Staten Island Principal Ronald Gorsky hasn’t cast any spells to turn his school around.

But, thanks to Concord HS’s dramatic improvement in English Regents scores, it was invited to be one of 40 city public schools to send students to see “Harry Potter” author J.K. Rowling do a reading at Carnegie Hall.

Since 2004, when Gorsky took the helm of Concord, a transfer school for kids who were unsuccessful in traditional high schools, his “vision has been the driving force behind the exceptional progress” made by students, said Assistant Principal David Ashe.

**Nominator: David Ashe**

## **LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT**

*For the individual whose accomplishments reflect the very best of our city.*

**Roscoe Brown:** Roscoe Brown, who fought the Nazis in World War II as a pilot with the legendary Tuskegee Airmen, is still soaring like an eagle at age 85, as director of the City University’s Center for Urban Education Policy.

In March, he received the Congressional Gold Medal - Congress’ highest civilian award - along with his fellow all-black Tuskegee pilots, for their service battling the Germans.

After World War II, Brown came to New York and made a career out of serving young people. He was president of Bronx Community College from 1977 to 1993.

**Nominator: Dr. Matthew Goldstein**

**Ray Negrón:** The baseball gods smiled on Ray Negrón when he was a troubled teen. Now he’s the true “pride of the Yankees,” devoting much of his time to kids with cancer.

“I’ve been so blessed,” said Negrón, 51, an adviser to Yankee owner George Steinbrenner. “I just want to pass on

inspiration to the kids who need it most.”

When Negron was 17, Steinbrenner caught him spray-painting graffiti at Yankee Stadium. Instead of punishing him, The Boss took him on as a batboy.

Negron spends much of his time at hospitals and schools across the tri-state area, and for years has visited pediatric cancer wards.

**Nominator: Aris Sakellaridis**

**Msgr. William O'Brien:** In 1963, the popular attitude about drug addicts was “once an addict, always an addict,” with users either being locked up or hospitalized in an endless cycle.

But a young priest from St. Patrick’s Cathedral thought differently. That year, Father - now Monsignor - William O’Brien founded Daytop Village, a therapeutic community that was the first of its kind in the city.

The program, which relies on positive peer pressure rather than drugs, has helped more than 200,000 people.

“It’s 50 years later and it’s been amazing,” said the 84-year-old monsignor.

**Nominator: Brian Madden**

**NEW YORK’S FINEST**

*For the police officer whose on-the-job performance reflects the department’s honor and selflessness.*

**Angel Cruz, Jr.:** Rookie cop Angel Cruz, Jr. was millimeters away from losing his life as he knew it when he was knifed through the skull during a fierce fight at a Brooklyn subway station.

“The doctors told me had the stab wounds been less than a quarter of an inch deeper into my brain, I would’ve probably been a vegetable,” said Cruz, who was patrolling the Broadway Junction station on March 14 when he told two men to stop smoking.

One of them took out a hunting knife, and allegedly plunged it into his head. Cruz squeezed off five shots and tackled the fleeing man before losing consciousness.

**Nominator: Police Commissioner Ray Kelly**

**Chris Alger:** When the city was shocked and outraged by the mugging of a 101-year-old woman in Queens last March, Detective Chris Alger became focused.

The 16-year veteran said he was horrified after watching the surveillance tape of elderly Rose Morat getting punched over just \$33.

Alger worked 20-hour shifts for two months, talking to witnesses, searching databases, handing out wanted posters, and sorting through thousands of tips before he collared the suspect.

“It was extremely satisfying,” he said of the arrest. “I had a lot of help from the people I work with. It’s all about teamwork.”

**Nominator: Police Commissioner Ray Kelly**

**Herman Yan:** “Supercop” Herman Yan fended off a group of vicious thugs in a Brooklyn gun battle during a traffic stop in July, standing his ground and returning fire after his partner was fatally shot.

Yan, shot in the arm and hit in his bulletproof vest, had his gun in one hand, his radio in the other, and “was calling in his location and a description of the fleeing car, details that would ensure that all three suspects were captured,” said Police Commissioner Ray Kelly.

Officer Yan was later promoted to detective. His hero partner, Russel Timoshenko, was promoted posthumously to detective.

**Nominator: Police Commissioner Ray Kelly**

## **NEW YORK'S BRAVEST**

*For the firefighter or EMS technician whose performance in the line of duty best exemplifies the department's unflinching heroism.*

**George Brennan:** FDNY Lt. George Brennan saved the life of an 83-year-old woman last fall, then simply called it "what we do every day."

After Brennan, of Engine Co. 53 in Manhattan, helped some tenants out of the building at 101 Street, he knew he had to keep looking.

"I opened [a] door just to see where the fire was," Brennan said. "I crawled in. The fire was in a room next to the kitchen - I just found her laying on the floor passed out."

With one mighty tug, he pulled the elderly woman out to safety, and his fellow firefighters took her to a nearby hospital.

**Nominator: Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta**

**Glen Merkitch:** Firefighter Glen Merkitch's best Christmas present was saving the life of a Brooklyn man last winter.

When Ladder Co. 120 was sent to a fire on Dec. 11, they rescued people trapped in a third-floor inferno.

Then, after kicking down a charred door, Merkitch crawled beneath the thick, black smoke, feeling around in the darkness, and found an unconscious Theodore Dinkins. He dragged him to safety.

"It was touching knowing he wound up living," said Merkitch. "It made the holidays extra special."

**Nominator: Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta**

**Daniel Bowman:** Lt. Daniel Bowman of FDNY Engine Co. 281 rushed up six flights of stairs to save a woman from a Brooklyn fire last December.

While going through the building on Albermarle Road looking for victims, he ran into a terrified man who told him that his wife was trapped on the sixth floor.

"There was zero visibility - but something told me I needed to go left," Bowman said "So I went left to the farthest point and I found a woman badly burned and gasping for air."

He quickly got her out, and was sad to learn she died a few days later.

**Nominator: Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta**

## **AMBASSADOR**

*For the man or woman who revealed the finest qualities of New York to the world.*

**Dr. Samuel Weinstein:** Bronx surgeon Samuel Weinstein really gives from the heart - he donated his own blood to an 8-year-old boy during cardiac surgery in El Salvador, then went right back into the operating room to finish the lifesaving procedure.

"I joked with his parents that he might wake up and become an avid Mets fan," said Weinstein, director of Pediatric Heart Surgery at Montefiore Medical Center, of the donor drama last year in San Salvador, where he had gone on one of his frequent mercy missions.

**Nominator: Michael Quane**

**Jeff Parness:** Americans opened their arms to New Yorkers after 9/11, and West Sider Jeff Parness travels the nation to show "we'll be there to help them in their time of need."

Each year on the weekend before the 9/11 anniversary, his New York Says Thank You Foundation takes volunteers to a community hit by disaster to work on a rebuilding project.

“To me, 9/12 changed New York as much as 9/11,” Parness said. “We witnessed the horror, and then we witnessed the kindness and humanity when people . . . went out of their way to come and help us.”

**Nominator: Colleen Shean**

**Elizabeth and Stephen Alderman: After their 25-year-old son, Peter, was killed on 9/11, Elizabeth and Stephen Alderman created a living memorial to honor him - a charity that is helping thousands of terrorism victims around the world.**

**The Peter C. Alderman Foundation trains doctors in terror-torn countries to help survivors too traumatized to function.**

**“We train local doctors to help their own populations, and they in turn train hundreds of mental-health workers,” said Elizabeth.**

**So far, the foundation has trained 35 doctors from 12 countries and opened mental-health clinics in Cambodia and Uganda.**

**Nominator: Stacey Richman**

## **COURAGE**

*For a notable act of bravery by a civilian that contributed to saving a human life.*

**Michael Abatantuno and Anthony DiMasso:** Two of New York’s Strongest proved their might big time when they bashed a sunroof off an overturned SUV and rescued a woman and her toddler trapped inside.

Sanitation workers Michael Abatantuno, 30, and Anthony DiMasso, 29, were doing a departmental mail run on the Van Wyck Expressway on July 19, 2006, when they saw the crash, pulled over and sprinted across three busy lanes of traffic to get to the mangled vehicle, which was leaking gas.

They kicked in the sunroof and pulled the two out to safety.

**Nominator: Krysa Kintzoglou**

**Wesley Autrey:** Wesley Autrey, who rescued a man who had fallen into the path of a subway train, doesn’t consider himself a hero.

“I just reacted,” he said of the Jan. 2 drama when Cameron Hollopeter, 20, collapsed onto the tracks after having a seizure - just as a train was entering the 137th Street station.

“I was like, ‘Somebody’s got to help this guy or he’s toast,’ “ Autrey recalled.

He jumped down from the platform, rolling Hollopeter into the trough between the tracks and shielding him with his own body as the train screeched to a halt above them.

**Nominator: Quiana Autrey**

**José Quinones:** When Upper West Side building manager José Quinones burst into a 90-year-old woman’s blazing apartment last month, the smoke was so thick, he couldn’t see a thing.

Quinones, who had rushed into the burning second-floor apartment at 194 Riverside Drive, suddenly stumbled onto her as she lay on the floor.

“I grabbed her and said, ‘We’ve got to go. I did a double hook under her shoulders . . . and dragged her out to the hallway,” he said.

She was taken to Weill Cornell Hospital, and survived with minor burns.

“He saved her life,” said one family member.

**Nominator: Peter Daw**

## **COMMUNITY**

*For the person whose activities most improved the quality of life in a borough or neighborhood, or bettered conditions at a particular public place.*

**Theresa Brucculeri:** Ronald McDonald doesn't just clown around when it comes to showing up at Theresa Brucculeri's annual fund-raising bash.

“He does a magic show and takes photos with the kids,” said Brucculeri, who launched the Friends and Family fund-raisers held each December that so far have raised \$1 million for the Ronald McDonald House of Long Island.

The Queens grandmother volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House in New Hyde Park, which provides a home away from home for families of seriously ill kids who are being treated at nearby Schneider Children's Hospital and other local medical centers.

**Nominator: Robert Weitzner**

**Dr. Monica Sweeney:** For two decades, Dr. Monica Sweeney worked in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, educating residents about AIDS prevention and health care.

“It's not about the doctor, it's about them,” said Sweeney, now an assistant city health commissioner for HIV prevention. “It's about knowing what to do yourself.”

Sweeney was especially proud of the work she did to help pass New York's “Baby AIDS Law,” which offers testing and counseling to every pregnant woman in the state and requires every newborn to be tested for the disease.

**Nominator: Dr. Ruth Browne**

**Dr. Norbert Sander:** Dr. Norbert Sander, who won the New York City Marathon in 1974, salvaged the place where he once trained as a runner so that thousands of city kids could also have a shot at the gold.

While in high school, he ran on the track at the Washington Heights Armory. But in 1987, the city began using the building for a homeless shelter.

Sander got government grants and private donations for the armory. In 1993, he got the keys to the building.

Since then, the Armory Foundation, which he heads, has turned the building into an athletic and educational center.

**Nominator: David Herscher**

## **FREEDOM**

*For a New Yorker from a foreign land who best embodies the immigrant values of honesty, industriousness and hard-earned success.*

**Moisés and Milagros Pérez:** Their love for each other led them to a devotion to their community - and Moisés and Milagros Pérez, who both emigrated from the Dominican Republic in their youth, epitomize the American Dream.

They started Alianza Dominicana, which for the past 20 years has served as an outreach to the immigrant population of Washington Heights.

The foundation was launched to provide community services on a wide array of issues, such as AIDS education and teen pregnancy. The couple has built it up to a nonprofit organization with an annual budget of more than \$10 million.

**Nominator: Miriam Mejia**

**Nooria Nodrat:** Nooria Nodrat has known terrible adversity - she lost her eyesight and her husband in unrelated

tragedies - but she thinks only of helping others.

Nodrat, 45, who emigrated from Afghanistan in 1991, lost her husband in a terrorist bombing in Kabul in 1988. She was robbed of her eyesight in 1997, when a deranged woman attacked her on the subway at 34th Street.

A student at the New York City College of Technology, she is president of the National Federation of the Blind's New York Student Division, and volunteers with the Catholic Guild for the Blind and the Jewish Guild for the Blind.

**Nominator: Dale Tarnowieski**

**Leo Nicholas:** At 68 years old, Queens resident, Leo Nicholas is more active than most teenagers.

After emigrating from Ireland in the 1950s, he worked various jobs, settled into a career at Citibank, and raised four daughters.

Now, he manages the Queens annual Half-Marathon Road Runners race, fights graffiti and cleans up his local park.

"There are times you have to give back. I do it in a small way. It's my way of saying thanks to America," said Nicholas. "It's nice to give back to the community. I don't do things to get recognition."

**Nominator: Brendan Ronan**