



Commack Council of PTAs
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Commack Council of PTAs
52nd Annual Founders Day Celebration
February 1, 2024

**Distinguished Service Award, Honorary Life
Membership, Advocate in Action, and
Inclusive Educator Recipients'
Biographies and Thank You Messages**



PTA Council Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Shaina Roth

Shaina Roth is a senior at Commack High School. Shaina is the president of the Commack Hebrew Culture Club and the New York Jewish Student Union. She also has two jobs. She is a teaching assistant at East Northport Jewish Center, where she is loved by students, family, faculty, and leadership, and works in a daycare. Shaina is involved in a myriad of volunteer and charity opportunities. She is a community organizer and does not hesitate to step forward and speak up for what's right. Most recently, Shaina took it upon herself and other students to coordinate a supply drive for Israel by placing collection boxes in each building. Shaina is quite a unique young woman; she is mature, empathetic, ethical, and wise beyond her years. Because of all these reasons and so many more, the Council is exceedingly proud to present the award of Honorary Life Membership to a student for the first time!

I am so honored and grateful to receive the Honorary Life Membership Award for PTA Founders Day. I want to thank the PTA and Eden Weisberg for supporting me along the way and helping me to achieve this honor. It is my pleasure to have grown up in this community and to learn from such amazing teachers. I have had many opportunities to engage in volunteerism and I'm thankful I've had the support to grow and explore in leadership roles.

As the president of the New York Jewish Student Union and Commack Hebrew Culture Club, I'm grateful to lead incredible groups of young adults. In these forums, we are able to have mature discussions about world events and discrimination. I'm impressed to see people of other faiths attending the meetings, no matter the topic. The Commack administration has made sure to attend and demonstrate their support at our meetings. This year, I, with a friend, started a donation drive for soldiers and civilians who were displaced from their homes when the terrorist group Hamas attacked Israeli civilians on October 7th. The drive couldn't have been as successful without the outpouring of support from the Commack community. The Commack School District, Suffolk Y JCC, East Northport Jewish Center, and Commack High School's administration stepped up in solidarity for the cause. In addition, the community has joined me as I lead a weekly walk in the Commack community to bring attention to the hostages, and the unwavering support of the community is an integral part of raising awareness.

Again, I'd like to express my appreciation for that support, to thank again the PTA for recognizing me for this award, and to thank my entire family for everything they do!

Advocate In Action - Robert Ciani

Mr. Rob Ciani wears many hats. He has been a Commack teacher for almost a quarter of a century, positively impacting countless students. Twenty-four years of fourth graders have had the privilege of learning with Mr. Ciani. With credentials in special education and gifted education, he is able to reach and support his diverse group of learners. Mr. Ciani is an educator for all students. In addition to his talents in the classroom, Rob has served children, families, and the Commack community with leadership roles ranging from curriculum writing to legislative advocacy and club advising to PTA and SEPTA executive board membership. When the PTA/SEPTA has a new initiative, Rob is a go-to as both a sounding board and a solid partner representing the CTA. Whether it be a board of ed meeting, a PTA council meeting, or any of a myriad of committees, one can expect to find Rob there - listening, learning, and guiding Commack onward and upward in our journey of excellence.

SEPTA is proud to present Mr. Rob Ciani with the Distinguished Service Award in the same year the PTA council presented him with the Advocate in Action Award. Mr. Ciani has previously been awarded the Honorary Lifetime Member award. He embodies the trifecta of advocacy awards and we are so grateful to have him in Commack!

I'd like to thank every PTA/SEPTA mother, father, grandparent, guardian, teacher, and administrator who has helped make Commack a great place to grow up.

I'm proud and so humbled to be receiving these two prestigious awards. Tonight is a true highlight in a 24-year career.

I want to thank 1980's Old Farms. The PTA sponsored amazing events like talent shows, carnivals, and Bingo, where I got to experience the heart-pounding adrenaline of yelling, "Bingo" in a packed gymnasium and strut my way over to the prize table. Forty years later, I'm calling numbers and watching some youngster yell "Bingo," as they floss and dap their way over to the prize table. The styles have changed, but thankfully, the wholesome childhood our Commack PTA/SEPTA supports has not. Thank you, PTA, and thank you, Septa, for being the constant in this community. Thank you, Heather Gordon and Eden Weisberg, for your leadership and carrying the torch forward.

I'd like to thank a few people, beginning with Marilyn Wunder for hiring me and teaching me how to be an educator. I'd like to thank Michelle Tancredi-Zott for nurturing my growth as an educator and encouraging me to achieve my potential. Thank you to ALL of my fellow educators in Commack and especially Sawmill. Thank you, Commack Teachers Association for your unwavering commitment to Commack's educators and Commack education over the past 50 years. Without the union, I would not have the ability to advocate for my students.

Obviously, I'd like to thank my parents (My mom was the PTA cardholder), for emerging triumphant from my brother and I's childhood shenanigans. I want to thank my wife, Rebecca, for all the love and support and always being the best partner in all my life adventures. I'd like to thank my daughter, Simona, for all the unicorns and rainbows, for introducing me to Nerds Gummies, and for always bringing wild creativity into every space she inhabits. Lastly, I'd like to thank Greyson, my teenage son with Angelman Syndrome for making me a father; for allowing me to see the capability and the strength in every person; and for helping me remember that the world of the child is as big or as small as the adults will allow it to be; and to every day choose kindness and generosity of spirit so that we may inhabit the community we want our children to live in.

Distinguished Service Award - Jennifer Fein

It is an honor to present Jennifer Fein with the Distinguished Service Award on behalf of the Commack Council of PTAs. A devoted PTA parent since her days at Wood Park, Jennifer's two children, Jessica and James, are now at the high school.

For many years now, Jennifer has worked year-round, tirelessly to bring our children the best in *Arts in Education* programming that supports and strengthens our children's curriculum and overall educational experience. She also spearheads the KidsArt project year after year for the K-5 students. Through the years, in addition to Arts in Education, Jennifer has served as chairperson of numerous committees in various buildings. She has also participated in district focus groups and committees and is currently in her second year as council vice president. This year, Jennifer put together binders for each unit in the district, including their bylaws and the NYS PTA Resource Guide. Jennifer steps up at every turn and is always willing to lend a hand. She is a strong advocate for the students of the community.

We are so grateful to have her serving with us in PTA year after year and we are thrilled to be presenting her with this prestigious, well-deserved award!

I am grateful and humbled to receive the PTA Council Distinguished Service Award. It is an honor to be among such a great group of recipients. This recognition reflects my efforts and is a testament to the collaborative spirit that defines our PTA. Initially, I joined the PTA to advocate for my children, but it quickly became a passion for supporting all students in the Commack School District. Together, we have created an environment where education thrives, and the well-being of our students is paramount.

The friendships I have made along the way have made this journey even more meaningful. I cherish my connections with teachers, staff, and PTA members. I want to thank everyone who allowed me to participate in my children's education.

I would also like to take a moment to thank my family - my daughter Jessica and my son James. They inspire me every day to be the best version of myself, and I am most proud of the outstanding young adults they have become. And finally, I want to express my most profound appreciation to my husband, James, for giving me the opportunity and support to do what I love. This award would not have been possible without you, and I am grateful to have you by my side.

SEPTA Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Eden Weisberg

Eden Weisberg has worked in the education world for over 20 years, including classroom teaching and administration. In addition, she has long been engaged in various advocacy initiatives, putting her M.S. Ed. to good use. Eden currently sits as the president of SEPTA. Eden has served as chair or representative for numerous PTA committees for over a dozen years. Additionally, Eden was a Girl Scout leader, a Boy Scout leader, and a community educator for a non-profit. Eden often shares that her life's mission is to "be the voice for those who feel voiceless while empowering individuals to grow toward self-advocacy." Eden's dedication to children and families, advocacy, volunteerism, and community building are why we chose her to receive this year's SEPTA Honorary Life Membership award.

I am honored and grateful to receive the award of Honorary Life Membership from Commack SEPTA this year. PTA, with a mission statement "to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children," guides my journey. Engagement, empowerment, advocacy, collaboration, commitment, diversity, respect, and accountability - these are the goals for which I strive and the focus of PTA. Throughout my years volunteering in Commack, I've had the great fortune to collaborate with many excellent parents and faculty. I am truly humbled to be included among this year's outstanding recipients. This year's SEPTA award recipients are the best of the best. To be acknowledged by SEPTA this year, with this cohort, an outstanding social worker, Amanda Schleisner, an excellent teacher, Rob Ciani, and an absolutely amazing student, Shaina Roth is particularly meaningful, and I thank the nominating committee. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the SEPTA board; they are an ethical, functional, cohesive group of women who model collaboration and advocacy beautifully and I am so appreciative of all the work we do together. I would like to thank the myriad of professionals who attend our meetings with dedication and the parents who join us in our support of students. I'd also like to thank the administration who has been so generous with their time and expertise. And, finally, all my love and thanks to my family, especially my children.

Advocate In Action - Amanda Schleisner

A graduate of Hunter College and Adelphi University School of Social Work, Amanda's career in social work and human services began at ACLD, where she worked as a job coach and later as a service coordinator. Amanda then gained clinical experience interning at Stony Brook University's CAPS Center, and later at Three Village School District. Recognizing her passion for school social work, Amanda began her role in Commack School District as a COVID relief social worker. In 2022, her position became permanent, and she currently works at Commack Middle School, where she is a member of the PBIS committee, SBMT, and serves as a co-advisor for CMS' Cause for Paws and Fitness Clubs. Amanda is involved in community outreach through annual Adopt-A-Family initiatives and helped to launch several programs and resources in CMS and district-wide in support of students' mental health, including CMS' STRIVE program and the district-wide Parent Resource Center.

I am beyond grateful for this recognition and would first like to thank Commack SEPTA for selecting me as a recipient of this year's Advocate in Action award. Being recognized for what I aim to do every day is truly gratifying. Thank you also to the administration and staff at Commack Middle School, who all offer constant support and recognize my passion for empowering students. I became a social worker because once upon a time, I was a little girl who had a social worker. Having experienced support throughout the day firsthand and now having the opportunity to give that experience back to the students of CMS in one way or another is incredibly fulfilling. A special thank you to Commack's amazing special education department, and especially the CMS Mental Health and counseling teams, all of whom I look up to and admire every single day. I'm grateful for your guidance and friendship! It is an honor to work alongside you all. To the families and students who I have crossed paths with so far, thank you for all the ways you have touched my heart and have encouraged me to do better each and every year. It is a privilege to be a part of your journeys. Thank you for your trust in me. Last but not least, thank you to my family- my husband, Will, and our two awesome boys, Brandon and Owen. Thank you for your constant love and support. You are truly my inspiration behind what I do each and every day.

Distinguished Service Award - Robert Ciani

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Inclusive Educator - Christine Campa

Mrs. Christine Campa's passion for teaching and willingness to go above and beyond as a general education teacher for her students with special needs inspired SEPTA to create the Inclusive Educator Award in her honor. Mrs. Campa has been an integral part of the Burr Intermediate School family for the past 26 years, ten of those years as an ICT teacher and the past five years teaching ENL students. She is an active member of the PTA and SEPTA, has mentored countless faculty members, and has been an advisor for the Continental Math League for more than ten years.

Mrs. Campa's approach to teaching is genuinely impactful. Her ability to nurture self-esteem, confidence, and independence is as strong as her commitment to grades, performance, and preparedness. She cultivates a classroom environment that values kindness, respect, and inclusivity. She recognizes and celebrates each student's unique gifts and personalities and advocates to ensure they realize their potential while promoting a collaborative, fun, and dynamic classroom setting. Mrs. Campa embodies wisdom, experience, and expertise and leads with integrity, humility, heart, and humor. As a mother, wife, grandmother, sister, friend, and colleague,

Mrs. Campa is a true inspiration to all who have the privilege of knowing her, working with her, and learning from her. Her unwavering commitment to her students' success and profound contributions to the Commack School District has made her the ultimate role model for inclusive education.

I am deeply humbled and honored to be the first recipient of the Inclusive Teacher Award. I have worked at Burr Intermediate School for more than 26 years and have always felt blessed to work alongside such dedicated teachers who consistently go above and beyond to help their students. To me, teaching isn't a job, it's a calling. I want to thank my colleagues, administrators, and past, present, and future students' parents for partnering with me to help "our" children reach their full potential. I always try to remember, "Every student can learn, just not on the same day or in the same way." Congratulations to all of my Commack colleagues who are also honored this year!

Commack High School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Gina Velasquez

Commack High School PTA is pleased to present Gina Velasquez with the Honorary Life Membership award. Gina has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the well-being and education of students, especially those with special needs. Her dedication is evident through her tireless efforts to ensure that every child receives the support and resources they need to thrive in the educational system. Gina has been a beacon of hope for all parents.

Gina has served as an officer of SEPTA, where she co-chaired a resource fair and worked on a Spread the Love festival. She advocates for students at the building and district levels and is active on Commack High School PTA, where she is a liaison for SEPTA and participates in stakeholder meetings.

Gina has advocated on behalf of all students--not just her own. She has helped so many understand the unique needs of students of all abilities. Gina's empathetic and caring nature shines through in her interactions with students, parents, administrators, and teachers. She embodies what the PTA stands for and what this award represents. Congratulations Gina!

Thank you to the Commack High School PTA Founders Day Committee. Words cannot express how honored I am to receive one of the Honorary Life Membership Awards. I always try to advocate for all the children in our community & I do it from my heart. May we all be honored one day for the special things we do for others around us. Thank you for this award. It has brought joy to me to be recognized for all I have put my heart into! I'm forever grateful.

Advocate In Action - Christina Semple

Our recipient for the Advocate in Action is Christina Semple. Christina has been with the Commack School District since 2000. Since then, Christina has taught each grade in the English Department and many electives. Christina's experience in the publishing world propelled her to the adviserships of both The Courant, our school's newspaper, and Crossroads, our annual yearbook. Christina inspires many students who want to study further journalism, news reporting, layout design, and graphic imaging. Christina is always on the cutting edge of new and exciting technology. Both the Courant and the Crossroads Yearbook win a myriad of awards each year in her stead.

I am so grateful for being named "Advocate in Action" and would like to thank the PTA and the high school and district administrative teams for this honor. Over the past 24 years, my work both in and out of the classroom has allowed me the opportunity to interact closely with so many students, administrators, colleagues, coaches, families, and community members. Inside my 9th-grade English classroom, I have always had the pleasure of supporting the newest additions to our building by guiding them through life as a high schooler. Outside of my classroom and in our student newsroom, I teach the craft of journalism that provides students with an authentic opportunity to share their voices, transcending beyond our school walls and bringing their stories to the world. Working with students documenting everyday life in our high school allows the opportunity to be all-inclusive, which has always been my priority. Despite the challenges the world may throw at us, it has always been my focus to be a source of consistent support for all of my students. I am so appreciative and thankful for the constant support that I am given each and every day by the Commack High School community and my English department family.

Commack Middle School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Desiree Carbonaro

Desiree Carbonaro has been an active community member since her four kids started school in Commack. She has been a class mom since her older daughter, now 12 years old, entered school. Desiree always goes above and beyond to ensure she can help when help is needed. She always raises her hand when there is a need for volunteers. She was a Girl Scout leader for many years and is actively involved in all her kids' schools and after-school activities. She runs the school store in Sawmill, where she needs to order merchandise, keep the inventory, set the store up, and ensure everything is ready to run a smooth sale. In addition, she is on the boards of both the Sawmill and CMS PTAs. She is also a member of various committees, a representative at the superintendent liaison meeting, and volunteers in almost all events that the PTA runs. Desiree is a person who will always make herself available to help and support the community in every possible way. Desiree is well respected and deserves the special honor of being recognized as a Founders Day Award recipient.

I am honored and sincerely grateful to be named the HLM Founders Day Award recipient. This was so unexpected! Having my daughter there to surprise me with flowers made it even more special. I am so glad to be able to donate my time and work alongside our dedicated educators and my fellow PTA Board Members to help support our school and the students. It has been such a pleasure being able to help out at the school events. Seeing all the children have fun at these events makes it all worth it. I want to thank the Middle School Administration for always being so supportive and helping us with whatever we need, whenever we need it. It truly is a collaborative effort to make our school a great place to learn, grow, and have fun. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it.

Advocate In Action - Jason Fluger

Mr. Fluger has been a member of the Commack School District since 2006. He has served in various roles during his time in the district. As a dedicated advocate, Mr. Fluger consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that students of Commack feel supported and included in the school community. Mr. Fluger has played a pivotal role in enhancing the athletic programs at Commack Middle School, ensuring that our students have access to high-quality sports experiences. Mr. Fluger has served as a teacher, coach, mentor, and organizer of various athletic events and teams. His unwavering support for students' athletic endeavors has had a profound impact not only on their physical health but also on their personal development, teamwork, and leadership skills. His efforts have touched countless students' lives and left a lasting mark on our school community. Mr. Fluger's dedication to our students and his exceptional commitment to fostering positive relationships and creating an inclusive learning environment truly embody the spirit of Founder's Day. I am confident that honoring Mr. Fluger with this award will be a source of inspiration for all of us.

Thank you. It is an honor to have been chosen from the outstanding number of teachers, my colleagues, for the Founders Day Award. Daily, my path interacts with students. They embody the future of our country and may give of themselves to make the next generation's future brighter, safer, and more prosperous. I am proud to have had some influence that may inspire young minds to bring innovations, cures, and novel perspectives into an ever-increasing, complicated world. The saying goes, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." Henry Adams. Thank you for choosing me for this prestigious honor!

Burr Intermediate School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Candice Shcherbelis

Candice Shcherbelis has been a great part of the success of our school district. She does not need any recognition and will help whenever is asked. She may be the quiet one in the room, but I know she will always accomplish what needs to be done and always be willing to help out when and wherever needed.

Candice started at North Ridge with her oldest son, Aaron, followed by her second son, Ethan. She would always help the art teacher at North Ridge getting ready for the science fair, many long hours. Candace has chaired many events and has been on numerous committees at both North Ridge and Burr. She has been the class mom and grade rep and has always helped whenever needed. If anyone is ever in need of assistance, Candice is always available or makes the time to help.

Candice has embodied how valuable she is to our community not just within our school, but as a fellow community leader. She is a soccer admin for her sons. She has been a tremendous help in taking over many positions at Burr, some being SBMT and Nutrition, and she sits on the Executive Board as a Vice President at Burr.

It has been an absolute pleasure working with Candice. She is well-liked and respected and deserves the HLM award. She embodies the essence of what a Founder's Day recipient truly is.

So let us honor Candice Shcherbelis as a Founder's Day award recipient. Congratulations to an amazing person!

I have a profound sense of gratitude for accepting the PTA (HLM) Honorary Life Membership Award. It is truly humbling. I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to the selection committee. In addition, I want to thank the leaders of the PTA organization who have set the highest standards with a clear vision and unwavering dedication to education and the importance of our Commack community bound by a shared common goal. To my foundation of family and friends (who are family), you are instrumental in all my endeavors and I am grateful for your support. In closing, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all of the educators my children have had the privilege to learn beside. Your value is immeasurable. This honor means more than I can quantify and reflects the president, board members, and volunteers I have the privilege to work with concurrently.

Advocate In Action - Amy Dank

We are excited to present the Advocate in Action Award to Amy Dank who has dedicated 24 years to teaching students, mentoring new teachers, and volunteering her gifts, time, and energy to make a positive impact in all of the Commack Schools.

Her experience spans across various schools, where she has taught general music and chorus at Burr Intermediate School, Rolling Hills, Indian Hollow and North Ridge, 6th and 7th grade chorus and Treble Singers at CMS, and even virtually from Cedar Road K-5 Music.

In addition to her teaching responsibilities, she has displayed a passion for professional activities, volunteer work, and fundraising. She has served as a Musical Director for plays and musicals, accompanied concerts, and mentored new teachers. She has also held the position of SCMEA presenter for Classroom Music, led student assemblies, and been a cooperating teacher for student teachers.

Her ability to teach empowering life skills by encouraging her students to experience and collaborate in music class is awe-inspiring.

We are grateful for her unwavering commitment to her profession and her students. Congratulations on this well-deserved recognition!

Thank you for this recognition. I consider it a privilege to share my love for music with our amazing students in Commack. I also really appreciate the support from both the PTA and the administration! We make a great team.

I hope that music opens a door for my students to feel confident in their ability to appreciate and participate in music of all kinds. Music in itself is a collaborative subject. Even though I always strive to make my lessons fun, students are learning vital skills in listening, working well with others, communicating, creating decoding, and fluency.

Distinguished Service Award - Linda DeAngelis

Linda DeAngelis is a valued member of the PTA and the Commack Community. Since her eldest son entered kindergarten, Linda has been involved in the PTAs at North Ridge, Burr, and the Middle School. She has chaired Kids Art, yearbook, and photography for years in both North Ridge and Burr. She is a past vice president at North Ridge and is currently serving her second term as president at Burr while also serving as a vice president at Commack Middle School. Linda is always more than willing to assist with any committee or project and pours her heart and soul into the schools for the children of this community. She has also served on numerous district committees including Health and Safety. When she is not volunteering at school, Linda can be seen on the soccer or football fields with her sons, Thomas and Joey, or with her Boy Scout Troop. Congratulations, Linda, on the well-deserved honor of being Burr's Distinguished Service Award recipient.

It is with great honor to be the recipient of the PTA Council Distinguished Service Award for Founder's Day. I find it a great pleasure to be part of an elite group of recipients. I have never thought of being a part of such an amazing group of people, but to receive an award for something that I never expected to be part of is such a blessing and beyond rewarding work. When I first started helping with the PTA, I truly was not sure what I had gotten myself into, however, when you see the PTA working diligently to put shows on for the kids, organize special events, create crafts, compile lifelong yearbooks of memories, and more, you cannot help but be filled with excitement and joy. The happiness that exudes from the children is an incredibly amazing feeling. It is truly awe-inspiring to see these kids grow from preschool years and beyond.

Thank you to all of my family, the friends I have met and worked with throughout the years, as well as Commack's wonderful administration. I would like to acknowledge my husband, Stephen, for being so accepting of the time I spend working on projects at the school. A special thank you to my oldest son, Thomas, for all his help with anything needed, especially lifting so many boxes and setting up events. He truly is the reason I started dedicating my time to the PTA and learned to appreciate what we do for the kids. As for my youngest son, Joey, he understands that I am at the school to help and support all of the children, not just him. Knowing that he is happy that I can help at the school lights up his face with wide eyes and great excitement. That is a feeling of such happiness for the both of us. I am so proud of my boys for sharing their mommy with the rest of the Commack community!

I am extremely appreciative of this award and feel truly honored from the bottom of my heart.

John Mardracchia-Sawmill Intermediate School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Annemarie Crisci

MSIS PTA is honored to present Annemarie Crisci with the Honorary Life Membership award for her remarkable dedication and selfless contributions to Rolling Hills and Sawmill. Annemarie is a shining example of a committed and caring volunteer who has played an invaluable role in enhancing the educational experience for countless students. Her passion for the well-being of students is evident in her tireless efforts, as she has continuously gone above and beyond to support both schools and the Commack community at large.

Annemarie's commitment is not limited to a single school but extends across both Rolling Hills and Sawmill. She has taken on leadership roles, including being an officer of Rolling Hills PTA and Commack Council of PTAs, co-chairing staff appreciation at Rolling Hills and Sawmill, serving as class parent, and co-chairing various fundraising committees where her creativity has left a lasting impact (Duck Donuts, Stuff-a-Bear, and spirit wear). Annemarie's work goes beyond her official roles, as she's always ready to lend a helping hand, whether planning events, coordinating fundraisers, or simply being there for the students. Her warm and caring personality has made her a beloved figure among students and parents.

Annemarie's genuine concern for students' well-being and her tireless dedication to improving their school experiences are truly exceptional and deserving of this award.

Thank you to the Sawmill PTA and Founders Day Committee for honoring me with this year's Honorary Life Membership Award. Working with such amazing staff, parents, and children has been my pleasure. I have thoroughly enjoyed running events, chairing committees, and giving back to the one-of-a-kind Commack community. I look forward to helping and working with the members of the PTA in the future.

Advocate In Action - Lindsey Persichilli

Lindsey Persichilli has taught at Sawmill for many years. Over the years, she held various positions such as school librarian, 3rd-grade teacher, 5th-grade teacher, and most recently, Enrichment teacher. She is also a co-advisor of the National Science League and has held the honor of leading her team to win 1st Place last year. She is also the creator and advisor for the Nuts n' Bolts Club. Her students love attending Enrichment so much that there is a waitlist to join this after-school club. The list of events that Lindsay has participated in is endless, from her contribution to Voices of Sawmill to directing the school play and everything in between.

Lindsey has served on a myriad of committees and curriculum teams in which she has been able to share her expertise in developing and presenting curricula for our students and staff. She is sought out by her colleagues for advice and guidance and is seen as a role model for all. It is no wonder she was chosen for the first Commack Elementary Star Award this past September.

Mrs. Persichilli embodies all the characteristics of an exemplary and talented teacher. She is creative, caring, compassionate, patient, and a lifelong lover of teaching. She is an enthusiastic team player who has actively helped to develop the Enrichment and Lunch 'n Learn curriculum at the intermediate level. Her dedication to her profession and the welfare of the students is truly remarkable. She enjoys seeing students benefit from her diligence and is always willing to go out of her way for them. Her ability to engage students in rich STEM curricula with great excitement and her desire to ensure that each student reaches his/her maximum potential is truly remarkable and commendable.

It is an honor to recognize Lindsey for this well-deserved award and a privilege to have her as a member of the Sawmill family.

I am truly honored and humbled to be the recipient of the Advocate in Action Award! I would like to thank the Sawmill PTA for selecting me for this prestigious award. From the moment I entered the field of education it became my mission to teach children through a multisensory approach. I believe that in order for a child to learn something new they must be completely engaged in the task. I started my career in Commack as an elementary classroom teacher. After 12 wonderful years, I was challenged to create a school-wide enrichment program with my fellow colleague Nicole Ryback. In 2014 the Enrichment program was born! Being given the opportunity to create hands-on, STEM-based lessons, challenging students to “figure it out” by presenting them with real-life engineering challenges, or just engineering for the fun of it, has been the most invigorating and defining moments of my career. Thank you again for the Advocate in Action Award. I promise to always “go big or go home” when it comes to working with the students, staff, and parents of the Commack School District.

Indian Hollow Primary School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Jennifer Palilla

Jenn Palilla has been integral to the Indian Hollow PTA since 2019. She has served on the following committees: Arts in Education, Yearbook, Zingo, Spirit Wear, Staff Appreciation, Founder's Day, and Family Picnic. Jenn has served as chairperson of the following committees: BOE/Budget, Founder's Day, Holiday Boutique, Yearbook, Book Fair, Family Picnic, Fashion/Talent Show, Zingo & Postal Service. In addition, Jenn served as an elected officer when she served as co-president of the Indian Hollow PTA for two years. Also, Jenn served as a PTA Council Representative during the 2020-2021 school year. Jenn is currently serving on the PTA Board at Indian Hollow Primary School & Burr Intermediate School. As you can see, Jenn has distinguished herself as someone who gives back to the Commack PTA community. Her level of commitment is one we should all emulate.

I am truly honored to receive the Honorary Life Membership Award for Indian Hollow this year. I am grateful for the opportunity to volunteer and work alongside such wonderful parents and staff to give our children the best experiences during their time at Indian Hollow. It is so rewarding to see all the students and their smiling faces!

I want to thank the Founders Day Committee and the Indian Hollow PTA for this honor, as well as Mr. Simpson and the teachers and staff at Indian Hollow for their constant support. And, of course, to my husband, Richie, and my children, Emily and Ryan, for always being my anchor. I am so proud to be a part of the incredible community at Indian Hollow, and I will forever cherish the memories made!

Advocate In Action - Lori Busch

Mrs. Lori Busch is receiving the PTA's Advocate in Action Award. Mrs. Busch is a member of the Indian Hollow family and is currently a kindergarten teacher. As an educator in the Commack UFSD, she has been an avid supporter of Indian Hollow's PTA. Mrs. Busch's role in Indian Hollow's PTA is to advocate and support from inside the classroom. As a member of the kindergarten team, she is constantly involved with the many unique events our kindergarten students have. Her organization helps to facilitate memorable and safe events. She works closely with committees and class parents every step of the way. Lori Busch goes beyond normal classroom responsibilities by supporting, sharing, and helping to facilitate the PTA in various ways.

Consideration, nomination, and reception of the Advocate in Action Award is a great honor. The PTA is a great family resource and a strong educational advocate by strengthening the ties between home, school, and community. Being a member of the Indian Hollow PTA is something I take pride in and is why being acknowledged this Founder's Day means so much. I love teaching children and watching them learn and grow academically, socially, and emotionally is an amazing experience. Working with the families in the Commack Community, both personally and professionally, is rewarding beyond measure. This community supports, appreciates, questions, listens, and gives their time selflessly. This all-encompassing commitment to their children is what makes teaching in Commack the true reward. My life was forever changed for the better in 1999 when I started this journey, and I cannot imagine giving myself to any other group of people. Thank you, parents, for inviting me into your homes and trusting my thoughts about your children. I am truly fortunate and consider myself lucky to call Commack my "home" and the Commack PTA my "family."

North Ridge Primary School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Leana Visalli

Leana Visalli is a valued member of the Commack Community. Being a busy mom to Dominick, Luca, and Arabella as well as a successful real estate professional, Leana still manages to find plenty of time to donate to the students of our community. In addition to chairing multiple committees at both North Ridge and Burr, Leana has also spoken about her career at the high school. She has also served as the recording secretary and president of the North Ridge PTA. You can also find Leana on the sports fields or in the gym where her daughter is an aspiring gymnast. Leana has a heart of gold and is always willing to lend a hand to anyone in need. It is our pleasure to present her with the Honorary Life Membership Award.

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for being honored with the Founder's Day Honorary Life Membership award. It is with immense humility and joy that I accept this recognition.

Receiving the Founder's Day award is not only a personal achievement but also a testament to the collaborative spirit and dedication of the entire community. I am truly touched to be acknowledged for my contributions, and I am grateful to be part of an organization that values and celebrates the efforts of its members.

I would like to extend my thanks to the PTA Council for their tireless efforts in organizing events and initiatives that strengthen our community. Your commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment is truly commendable, and it inspires me to continue contributing to the well-being of our students and community.

Once again, thank you for this prestigious award. I am truly grateful for the recognition and proud to be a part of the Commack PTA. I would not be here without the love and support of my family. Thank you to my husband, Michael, and our three incredible children, Dominick, Luca, and Arabella.

Advocate In Action - Donna Sandak

Donna Sandek has dedicated over 20 years to teaching in the Commack School District. She began her journey as a computer TA, where her commitment and care shined through. The administration quickly realized what an asset she was to the district and hired her as a general education teacher. She has been a general education and integrated classroom teacher throughout her career.

Whether teaching kindergarten or second graders, she is dedicated to her student's success and always prepares and delivers her lessons with their growth in mind. She is known for her community service projects almost every month, such as Halloween bags for children in hospitals, placemats for the elderly, cards for servicemen and women, and so much more. She is active in the Commack School District PTA and her home district. She has volunteered for the North Ridge Yearbook and at special events like NRINGO. She has also served on the site-based committee and has been a grade-level leader for years. Apart from her passion for teaching, she is an active member of her temple and serves on many committees. She is also a Girl Scout leader in her community.

She inspires her students and their families, is a role model for our community and her own, and makes the world a better place by emphasizing the importance of caring for others.

Thank you, North Ridge PTA and the Founder's Day Committee, for honoring me with this year's Advocate in Action Award. I am fortunate to have worked at North Ridge for the past 25 years of my teaching career within Commack. I am grateful to have learned and grown as an educator through the support of my administrators. In addition, I am most appreciative to my colleagues. I have enjoyed learning from them and building friendships filled with love and respect.

Educating a child takes a community. There is truly no better community than the one I have at North Ridge. The support of the PTA, parents, my colleagues, and the children throughout my years has always been positive. I have had the privilege of working with some amazing class parents who have done so much for me and the children. They have always supported me in enriching the children's lives with our service learner projects, paper mâché turkeys, and various class and school-wide events. Moreover, they have consistently helped me reinforce the importance of creating a classroom that reflects kindness and a love of learning.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband and my family for their continuous love. They have always supported my personal and professional endeavors and have selflessly been by my side along this rewarding journey.

Rolling Hills Primary School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Ricki Karbot

Ricki Karbot has been an active member of our Commack School District and Commack community for many years. She is a mom of two who works full time but is never too busy to assist and volunteer her time. Throughout her years, she has held many positions on the PTA boards, such as Vice President and Corresponding Secretary. In addition, Ricki has chaired many events and has made them so special for our students and their families. Rolling Hills Pumpkin Picking, Rolling Hills, and Sawmill Ice Skating, and the Teacher Appreciation Luncheon are a few events that Ricki has chaired throughout the years, and each one is done with love, dedication, and hard work. Throughout the community, Ricki has been a soccer coach and is always the first to say, "How can I help?" and "What needs to be done!" She is a team player and always volunteers at plant sales, book fairs, school stores, fall festivals, trunk and treats, and field day, to name a few. Ricki is a pleasure to work with and most deserving of this very special honor.

I would like to thank the Rolling Hills PTA for the nomination for Life Member. It has been an exciting few years that we have worked together to give these kids amazing new opportunities and activities and bring new fun experiences to Rolling Hills each year! I am honored for this nomination, and thank you all!

Advocate In Action - Diane Gandolfi

Diane Gandolfi has been a dedicated teacher at Rolling Hills since 1998. Her devotion to her students and her teaching craft has not been limited to inside her classroom. Ms. Gandolfi has consistently been an active PTA member over the years. While working at Rolling Hills, Ms. Gandolfi has served on numerous school-based committees such as the School Based Management Team, School Wellness, and the Parent Advisory Committee. Ms. Gandolfi attends and participates in multiple PTA-sponsored events such as Paint Night, Family Fitness Night, and the Fall Festival. She is a well-respected member of our community and school. When her students enter her classroom, they receive a structured and warm environment that allows them to flourish over the year. Ms. Gandolfi holds the highest expectations for her students and steadily supports them as they grow. She has shown her commitment and passion for Rolling Hills and its students for many years and is well deserving of this award for 2024.

I want to thank the Rolling Hills PTA for nominating me for this year's Founder's Day Award! It is an honor and a privilege to do what I do every day, touch the lives of so many children, and work in the most wonderful school!

Wood Park Primary School Recipients

Honorary Life Membership - Tricia Sonsire

Wood Park Primary School proudly presents Ms. Tricia Sonsire with the Founders Day Honorary Life Membership Award. Ms. Sonsire joined the Commack School District in 2001 and has made lasting contributions to Wood Park since she started. As the school Social Worker, Ms. Sonsire has been instrumental in developing activities like the Little Leaders Club, allowing students to serve on various committees such as teacher helpers and morning announcements. She is responsible for Kindness Week (random acts of kindness), Strong Start (first-grade social-emotional push-in), and Chillville (sensory room). Ms. Sonsire works closely with her co-workers and values their input. She has been a member of the Character Education Committee, which established Wellness Wednesdays (mindfulness and self-care for fellow staff members). In addition, she is the DASA (Dignity for All Students Act) coordinator which promotes incentives like playgrounds being accessible to all students and suicide awareness discussions for all new teachers. Ms. Sonsire has an incredible way of connecting with her students and the community at large. She is always thinking about how to help others by coordinating food drives, toiletry drives, and clothing drives for those in need. Her tireless devotion to Wood Park students is evidenced by her students' growth and social/emotional well-being. Her enthusiasm for education and the students of Commack is commendable and it is clear how much she loves what she does. Thank you, Ms. Sonsire, for your dedication to our students and school community.

I am deeply honored and humbled to accept the nomination for the Founders Day Honorary Life Membership Award, in recognition of my contributions as a school social worker. This acknowledgment, from the Wood Park PTA, holds a profound meaning for me. As a primary school social worker, I help lay the foundation for the social-emotional learning of our youngest students. I love being a part of the collective effort, to equip our students with the tools necessary to navigate and understand their emotions. It is an honor to work alongside the Commack School District's mental health staff, to provide the counseling and programs that support our students' emotional well-being. The support of my principal, Michelle Collison, has given me the opportunity to be a part of many programs and projects at Wood Park. I am grateful for her leadership and guidance, as she makes Wood Park an exciting and fulfilling environment. Any time we have an idea, no matter how big or small, Michelle is supportive and enthusiastic. Lastly, I would like to thank my family. Benjamin and Terry, you are my greatest accomplishment. I will never measure my success with money, rather, I measure it in our hugs, smiles, and every time we tell each other, "I love you." I will love you both unconditionally, always and forever. To my parents, Francis and Teresa Sonsire, I couldn't have done anything without your guidance, love, and support. I am grateful for all you do for me, and I love you both so much.

Advocate In Action - Karin Gerges

Mrs. Karin Gerges has been involved in the PTA, first as a parent for her own children where she served as 3rd PTA Vice President, and later as a teacher, when she began her career at Wood Park Primary School. Over the years, Karin has served on numerous district-level committees, including the Commack Teacher Center Council. She has eagerly participated in District events such as the Harlem Wizards as a Commack Crushers and Commack's Dancing with the Stars; Teacher Night. At the building level, Mrs. Gerges has served on the Character Education Committee, and as a PTA Teacher liaison. She has also been an integral part of many special events such as the legendary Carnivals, Partners in Reading events, and Literacy Night Committees and events. Mrs. Gerges enjoys attending District events like Founder's Day and Wood Park Galas and dinners, and sometimes she even shows off her amazing dancing skills. Those dancing skills earned her and Mr. Gerges, a 1st place award at Wood Park's Talent Show this past June. Mrs. Gerges's dedication to Wood Park does not end there, nor does her charisma and enthusiasm; taking part in team building activities such as Wood Park's "Day of Sleigh-riding" and EPIC Snowball fight! Mrs. Gerges is child-centered, and she embodies this notion in her classroom and in her daily interactions with her students, finding endless ways to develop student independence and leadership. Mrs. Collison shared that Mrs. Gerges always has a positive attitude and a bright smile. She shared that she seems to float through the day like Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music. Mrs. Gerges is honest, reflective, and eager to take on new challenges with a positive outlook. She creates a warm, nurturing learning environment for her students, even helping them build an enormous Kapok Tree in their classroom. As one parent shared, "I am tremendously grateful for the consideration Mrs. Gerges has shown. Her calm demeanor, along with her myriad of skills, is greatly appreciated." While another parent commented that she is "grateful for the respect she has shown and is truly a one-of-a-kind teacher, dedicated to her students." Mrs. Gerges understands the delicate balance between academic instruction and social and emotional needs. Mrs. Gerges is well respected by her colleagues. It is an absolute pleasure working alongside Mrs. Karin Gerges. Her outstanding contribution to the Commack students and families merits this special recognition and the community's appreciation.

Thank you for this wonderful honor! I humbly accept it on behalf of all my amazing colleagues in our Wood Park family and our super-supportive principal, Michelle Collison. I am so fortunate to work with such a caring and energetic community of administrators, teachers, and parents, who make the Commack school district a great place to work, live, and learn. It is a pleasure and a privilege to teach and to serve our children. Thank you, Wood Park PTA, for all you do!

Reflections Winners

Ava Demundo, Justin Ginsberg*, Adam Awerman*, Bianca Awerman*, Skylar Keluskar, Demma Orellana, Ryan Scarola*, Samantha Simson*, Alessandra DeStefano*, Ava Landman, Benjamin Lopes*, Aria Muchnik, Chloe Sherer*, Max Niebling*, Mylo Trinagel*, Evie Albano, Andrew Heffernan, Matthew Heffernan, Rafael Pérez*, Kayla Raikowski, Leo Scarola and Siena Scarola.
*Suffolk County Winners

Thank you to the administrators, teachers, and parents of the Commack School District for your ongoing support and dedication to the children of Commack.

We again extend our congratulations and thanks to this year's worthy recipients.

~ Council Founders Day Committee

The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes but also by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.

~ Helen Keller

To the world, you may be one person, but to one person, you may be the world.

~ Dr. Seuss



Commack Council of PTAs

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