

# Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to Toms River Native

By: Victoria Ford

As it turns out, Maria Ressa’s graduating class at Toms River High School North was right when they voted her “most likely to succeed” back in 1982.

In December Ressa accepted the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo for her courageous work to protect free expression and preserve journalistic integrity. The Filipino-American independent journalist is co-founder and CEO and Executive Editor of Rappler, a 10-year-old digital media company for investigative journalism and one of the Philippines’ leading online news organizations, which she still runs.



Maria Ressa.  
Photo Credit: Victoria Ford

Freedom of expression, according to the Norwegian Nobel Committee, is “a precondition for democracy and lasting peace” and, along with access to information, is a crucial right that ensures a better-informed public. “Free, independent, and fact-based journalism serves to protect against abuse of power, lies, and war propaganda.”

With Rappler, Ressa exposes corruption – abuse of power, violence, and growing authoritarianism – in her native Philippines, where she “has focused critical attention on the Duterte regime’s controversial, murderous anti-drug campaign,” the Nobel Committee noted. “The number of deaths is so high the campaign resembles a war waged against the country’s own population.” Rappler also calls out social media as a vehicle for falsehoods, harassment, and manipulation of public discourse.

Ressa turned 58 on Oct. 2. The Nobel Prize announcement came on Oct. 8.

She shares the prize with Dmitry Andreyevich Muratov, whose work is based in Russia, where he is co-founder and editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta, created in 1993, with a “fundamentally critical attitude towards power.”

Ressa and Muratov represent all journalists who stand up for the ideal in a world where “democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions,” the Committee stated.

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On Friday, Feb. 18, Ressa visited her high school alma mater, where principal Ed Keller called her “the personification of what we want our students to be.” She toured the auditorium that will be renamed in her honor and spoke to students about following their moral compass and not fearing failure.

Ressa attended Toms River public schools since she was 10 years old. Her classmate Debbie Scott recalls the day Ressa arrived from the Philippines. “She was so smart they skipped her a grade. In everything she did, she excelled.”

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According to Emily Aronson from Princeton University's Office of Communications, Ressa had flown overnight from the Philippines to be honored at Alumni Day at Princeton University, from which she graduated in 1986. The university made the arrangements for her visit to HS North.

But her trip was not totally snag-free. Her original schedule was delayed by one of the seven court approvals she needed to travel – from the Philippine Court that is handling her appeal for a cyber libel conviction; the matter was resolved with an emergency Zoom meeting.

Three years ago, Ressa was arrested on accusations that Rappler had published a false news story concerning businessman Wilfredo Keng. She was convicted under the controversial Anti-Cybercrime law, a move condemned by human rights groups and journalists as an attack on press freedom, according to Ressa's Wikipedia page: "As she is a prominent critic of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, her arrest and conviction was seen by many in the opposition and the international community as a politically motivated act by Duterte's government."

According to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, "(Ressa) has been honored around the world for her courageous and bold work in fighting disinformation, fake news and attempts to silence the free press."

She was named *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" in 2018.

Other awards and distinctions include: the Golden Pen of Freedom Award of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers; the Knight International Journalism Award of the International Center for Journalists; the Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award of the Committee to Protect Journalists; the Journalist of Courage and Impact Award of East-West Center; and the IX International Press Freedom Award of University of Málaga and UNESCO.

"She was CNN's bureau chief in Manila, then Jakarta, and became CNN's lead investigative reporter focusing on terrorism in Southeast Asia," according to the consortium. "She has authored two books – *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* and *From Bin Laden to Facebook*.

"In 1987, Maria co-founded the independent production company, Probe. In 2005, she managed ABS-CBN News and Current affairs, the largest multi-platform news operation in the Philippines. Her work aimed to redefine journalism by combining traditional broadcast, new media, and mobile phone technology for social change."

Ressa is also one of the 25 leading figures on the Information and Democracy Commission launched by Reporters Without Borders.

In accordance with the will of Alfred Nobel: "The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov is intended to underscore the importance of protecting and defending these fundamental rights. Without freedom of expression and freedom of the press, it will be difficult to successfully promote fraternity between nations, disarmament, and a better world order to succeed in our time."