2022 Salute To Ocean County Awardees

By: Victoria Ford

The Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission's annual awards celebration, the Salute to Ocean County, will not be held in person this year but will be launched virtually on Thursday, April 28.

This year's awardees include some of Ocean County's most excellent leaders in the humanities – women and men dedicated to preserving history, culture and the arts in their communities and regions.

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Receiving the John C. Bartlett, Jr. Government Leadership Award is Bahiyyah Abdullah, of Barnegat, a 30-year appointee to the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission. She has been selected for enriching the cultural fabric of Ocean County with her tireless contributions of community service, and for having "demonstrated the highest professional and ethical standards in leadership in the Ocean County nonprofit community," and because she "champion(s) the role of the arts and history in the County's vital tourism industry."



Bahiyyah Abdullah.
Photo Credit: Victoria Ford

Abdullah's legacy is characterized by her longtime commitment and dedication to the betterment of the Ocean County community and by using her voice to advocate for civil rights, social justice, the arts, history, girls, women, and children.

Abdullah is a retired Chief Mission Officer for the Girl Scouts of the Jersey Shore and the Ocean County Girl Scout Council (33 years); president of the Toms River Area NAACP (18 years); Commissioner for the NJ State Martin Luther King Jr. Commission; an executive committee member of the Eastern Regional and North Jersey Shore Chapter of Continental Societies; a board member for Big Brothers Big Sisters; a board member for the Sadie Vickers Community Resource Center; a member of the Associate Group of the Jersey Shore Chapter of Jack and Jill of America and a member of NJ Circle-Lets.

"I grew up in a family that always gave back to the community, and I continue with this legacy," she said. "I believe in the quote from Marian Wright Edelman: 'Service is the rent we pay for living.'"

For Abdullah, the work of helping to cultivate strong families and a culturally rich community is not just rewarding–it's imperative.

"You have to be involved in the community where you live," she said. "I believe that we all have a responsibility to make our community the best that it can be."

Abdullah was married for 27 years and then widowed; she has three grown children and seven grandchildren. "My late husband was a great supporter and advocate of my professional work and volunteer service, which enabled me to participate in many things in the community," Abdullah said, to explain how she has juggled so many responsibilities over the years. "He and my children often participated in some of the volunteer work I was

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involved in. Although it was not always easy, and my family sacrificed time with me at times, seeking balance between family, work, and volunteerism was always important. Making that a priority and achieving that balance has contributed greatly to the enrichment of my life and my service to the community."

The award is especially meaningful, Abdullah said, because she knew Commissioner Bartlett personally and observed his exemplary commitment and service to the residents of the county.

"I'm honored that the Cultural and Heritage Commission has chosen to recognize my 30+ years of service as an advocate for the arts and history and for my dedication to the greater Ocean County community. I feel blessed for the opportunities that I have been given to serve my community."

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Reisa Sweet.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Reisa Sweet of Lakewood, chair of the Ocean County Human Relations Commission, is being recognized for "a lifetime of building bridges between people of diverse communities to eliminate hate, bias and discrimination."

The Human Relations Commission comes under the county Prosecutor's Office, she explained. The focus of Sweet's work on the commission, she explained, is preventing bias crime – getting to the heart of the problem by asking, "What we can do?"

Bias crime is an infection, she said. The remedy requires self-knowledge and empathy. Healing starts at home. "It's a process," Sweet said.

As HRC chair, Sweet spoke during a 2019 press conference organized by the Simon Wiesenthal Center (see related story) at Toms River town hall in support of a municipal resolution denouncing antisemitic and other hate speech on the internet. In 2006, she traveled to Europe with the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education to visit historic sites and gain understanding.

Journaling can be an effective way to grow tolerance, she said. And the "Say Hello" initiative developed by the HRC's Rev. William Simmons is a way to break the ice with a stranger and start a dialogue. But the most important thing to do, in Sweet's opinion, is to bring together people with different lived experiences and have them get to know each other, listen to each other, and see their commonality, Sweet said.

"We're all going through the same things," she said. "We're all in a struggle." The state of the world and an uncertain future are causing widespread anxiety, fear, and "a tremendous division" among people, she said.

Sweet is the only child of immigrant parents – Ukrainian mom and Romanian dad. She heard Russian language spoken in the home – usually when her mom and grandmother wanted to shield her from talk of war.

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At a young age, Sweet made a commitment to speak out against unfairness or injustice. She credits her father with instilling that. Growing up in an apartment behind the family's grocery store, she observed her father's trust and relationship with people.

Her education includes two master's degrees – one in guidance and counseling from the University of Bridgeport and another in human development from Fairleigh Dickinson – and a reading specialist certification from Georgian Court.

For 40 years she taught students who had Individualized Education Plans in kindergarten through 6th grade. At Ocean County College, she taught in the "Teacher Professional Development Institute." Her course topics included: "Stop the Hate – Building Bridges for a Brighter Tomorrow"; "Never Too Early to Create a Social Conscience"; and "The Challenge for the Student Bystander – To Respond or Not to Respond." She also has published articles in the NJEA Review.

Sweet's late husband Ira Sweet was a strong advocate for social justice, according to Reisa. They met in grad school, on similar paths. Together they marched for civil rights. Whereas Reisa was raised in a reserved household and taught to "keep a low profile," Ira was very vocal about his principles. Both their daughter and son work in education and justice fields – she as a teacher and he as a lawyer.

"The impact of the Holocaust permeated my life since childhood," Sweet explained.

Though Sweet was a young child during the Second World War, images she saw in newsreels, of bodies of victims of Nazi concentration camps piled in pits, made an indelible mark. Movie theaters at that time would show current events before the Saturday feature film. In one such clip, Sweet noticed the body of a girl her own age, who "looked exactly like me," with the same facial features and curly dark hair. The resemblance made her gasp.

Terror gripped her, and all she could think was, "If my parents hadn't left Europe when they did, that could have been me. That could have been me." "I could not release the thought," she said. It was a defining moment.

The unknown girl became Sweet's "mystical twin" to whom she felt dutifully tied: "Who could speak for her but me? If I do not speak for her, who will?" Sweet vowed to be her voice. "When I witness pain and suffering, I must speak out. Maybe I can save or help rescue a soul."

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The Pauline S. Miller Lifetime Achievement Award for Ocean County History goes to Eleanor Fay Ditton of Forked River/Lacey. The Pauline Miller Award is given to an individual who has demonstrated a passion for Ocean County Heritage and shared that history with the public. A recipient must be an advocate of Ocean County heritage, active in the county for at least 10 years, and have done work that has a countywide impact, with a special emphasis on scholarship or teaching about Ocean County history. Ditton is being awarded for her role in the county's cultural fabric through her dedication to the history and people of Lacey Township.



Eleanor Fay Ditton.
Photo Credit: Victoria Ford

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Nominated by Patricia Trasferini, Ditton's work and contributions to the history community are deeply rooted: In the early 1960s after the Lacey Township Grade School (now Forked River Elementary School) was built, the town committee was contemplating selling the old Forked River schoolhouse no longer in use. In response, three women, Stella Wilbert, Charlotte Lane, and Betty Grant, petitioned town officials to save the schoolhouse. They needed help from the community; Eleanor Ditton answered the call.

Although Ditton says she honestly didn't know what she was getting into at the time by volunteering, she became one of the Old Schoolhouse Museum's greatest advocates for 40 years. Eleanor has served on the board of trustees as president and treasurer.

"During her terms in office, she ensured that all three sections of Lacey Township – Forked River, Lanoka Harbor, and Bamber Lakes – were equally represented in the oral telling of our town's history during public tours, programs, and exhibits shown in the Old Schoolhouse Museum," according to Trasferini. "She built connections in our community to help build the museum's artifact collection, which consists of schoolhouse memorabilia, historic photos, early industry and agricultural tools, and personal artifacts that once belonged to prominent members of our community."

Ditton's love for Lacey history is unparalleled. Sit beside her and listen as she reminiscences "about the early years of Lacey when her family moved to this small bayside side community, how she attended the old schoolhouse museum as a child and saw township businesses come and go over the years. Hear the names of prominent Lacey residents who became pillars in our community; and understand how the different neighborhoods 'sprung up in the Pines.' During her passionate and enthusiastic conversations, you always find yourself learning something new."

In Trasferini's view, what makes a true historian is the habit of provoking curiosity and interest in the past. Although Ditton is too humble to use the word historian, "she is woman worth celebrating for her commitment to sharing memories of the Old Schoolhouse Museum and the township.

"Not only did she touch many members' lives over the years, she did the most important thing any historian could wish to do in their lifetime, she left an impact on generations to come through her interactions and love of history."

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Reisa Sweet.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Master basket maker Mary May of Forked River has been selected for the Ocean County Lifetime Achievement Award in the Arts, which recognizes the extraordinary contributions of individuals and organizations to the quality of life in Ocean County.

Recipients are selected from the distinguished list of Ocean County artists representing many art forms, nominated by various individuals and organizations. In May's case, the award is for her "exceptional craftsmanship and dedication to tradition bearing," according to the Ocean Cultural & Heritage

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Heritage Commission. "(Her) decades of commitment to the art of basket weaving continues to have a lasting impact on Ocean County's cultural landscape."

May said "it's very humbling, really nice" to have received the honor.

She weaves mainly traditional New Jersey baskets ¬– e.g., berry baskets, pound fish baskets, eel fykes, pack baskets, market baskets. May specializes in South Jersey white oak baskets and basket traditions.

As with many traditional artists, May's craft is a family effort. Her husband built her a studio and makes custom tools and basket molds for her weaving and teaching pursuits. May describes her studio or "basket room" as her happy place – "a place you want to be."

The art form itself appeals to May in its simplicity, in that few tools are needed – just a good knife and two hands. Anyone can pick up basket weaving as a hobby, she added.

May said she enjoys the process of researching and compiling information on baskets and basket makers. For her NJ historical work, May visits local historical societies, museums and private collections. She might find a basket with nice lines, or some intrigue to it, and she'll borrow it to study and figure out how to replicate it. Later, she might design a class around that style of basket. If she decides to keep a certain one in her rotation, her husband will make 10-or-so molds out of pine for a class, which makes the basket making process smoother and more predictable. She can plan better, for example, when she knows a laundry basket project requires four pounds of material.

"To share what I do and regurgitate information to other people" is continuously rewarding, May said. In some of her longest-running classes, "we've been together 30 years." In one class students can make a classic, working pound fishing basket with an over-one-under-one squarish construction and double lashed rims for sturdiness.

"These baskets were traditionally tarred for longevity, some painted with identifying marks, and have been used by commercial fishermen off Long Beach Island from the late 1800s to 1940s," according to May. The Tuckerton Seaport's Crest Fishery exhibit has historical examples.

May's motivation to weave is rooted in pure desire, she said. She has always worked with her hands. Her "favorite" basket at any given moment is the one she is currently working on.

"I enjoy it so much," she said. "I like process, things that take a long time." Her preference is large baskets – big enough to require pliers or other tools for leverage. Once she made an eel fyke taller than she is. Some she has made are so delicate, they are meant to be artworks on a wall.

Her baskets have been on display at the New Jersey State Museum and Tuckerton Seaport, where she is a regular demonstrator. She is a teaching artist in the Jersey Shore Folklife Center's Jersey Traditions outreach program, for which she travels throughout the state; she also sits on the Folklife Advisory Board. May is an integral member of the Folk Art for Homebound program. She also works at the New Jersey Forestry Interpretive Center and the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences. She has been featured on Ebru TV's "Blank Canvas" and NJN's "State of the Arts."

For her satisfaction and her sanity are two reasons May weaves. For her personal enrichment is another. "Every basket I make, I learn something," she said.

Currently she's learning about charcoal baskets. Soon she'll travel to Maryland to apprentice with a master basket maker she admires, thanks to a folk arts grant from the NJ State Council on the Arts. "I'm one of those life learners," she said.

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Sometimes she hits the road to travel the state to gigs and shows. Soon she'll appear at Grounds for Sculpture and Rutgers Day. "Pretty much, if you call, I'll come," she said.

Though the lugging and loading is the least glamorous part of it, she participates in certain fairs and festivals each year, including the Wheaton Village Festival of Fine Craft in October.

Right before the pandemic started, May was so busy with projects and plans, she was wondering how she'd keep up with it all. COVID-19 changed everyone's plans, but for May an unrelated health crisis also forced her to slow down. Throughout her treatments, she continued to make baskets – where there's a will to weave, there's a way. She stuck to small projects, anything to keep her hands moving and her mind still. She modified her work to what she could do, exploring paper baskets.

For May, selling her baskets has always been the icing on the cake. Some repeat customers have built their own Mary May collections over the years.

Above all she believes in functionality. "I feel like my work needs to have a purpose," she said. She characterizes her work as sturdy, meant to be used: "It'll outlive me."

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The Joseph H. Vicari Ocean County Tourism Award is an honor normally given to the greatest monetary contributor – be it busines, organization, or individual – to the county's $4.7 billion tourism industry. This year the winner is the entire Ocean County tourism workforce.



The direct impact of pandemic-related stress was shouldered in 2021 by the people who kept restaurants running, amusement rides turning, soft ice cream swirling, and vacation homes and hotel rooms filling – all the retail businesses and services that make up the county's tourism-supported economy.

"It's the people who came to work over the past two seasons that kept us running," Ocean County Business Development and Tourism Division Director said, "at a time when all businesses had difficulty recruiting employees and when those who (did) come to work took a lot of abuse. This year's Vicari award is dedicated to the employees that kept Ocean County's Hospitality industry running through their frontline efforts."

Just a couple months into the pandemic, before the summer of 2020 really got underway, the Ocean County Commissioners and the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce took optimistic stances toward the future.

Commissioner Joseph Vicari described tourism as "a key economic engine" of the county. "Tourism supports hundreds of small businesses while providing employment opportunities for thousands of people, from high school students to seniors." Ocean County accounts for 11% of the state's total tourism revenue, ranking third of 21 counties, he added.

"Just because the business climate has changed, it doesn't mean that the tourism industry has stopped," Chamber CEO Lori Pepenella said. "It just has to adapt."

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Tourism spending in New Jersey did slow dramatically in 2020, but 2021 brought a comeback summer that had visitors swarming. Pepenella said the LBI region was able to capture near-capacity all summer, by bringing back events in a safely modified way that were well received.

“The tourism industry is comprised of many sectors, all of which relied on full-time, part-time and seasonal workers to display professionalism, courtesy and flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic” despite major customer service challenges, Lazzaro said. The workers enabled small businesses to remain open, safely and successfully, and facilitated visitors’ peace of mind and relaxation, she added.

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