



# The Independent Citizen

## Winter 2019

COMMUNITY ACCESS  
U N L I M I T E D

### *Congratulations—and Thank You—to Our Award Winners!*

Community Access Unlimited and our members were thrilled to honor three wonderful supporters at our 2018 Annual Gala Dinner Dance. New Jersey Senate President Stephen Sweeney was honored with the Humanitarian of the Year award, Senate Majority Leader Nicholas Scutari received the Public Leadership Award and Christopher Zucosky, owner of Phoenix Specialties in Garwood, took home the Geller Award for volunteerism.

Steve Sweeney has focused on improving the lives of people with disabilities since his daughter was born with Down syndrome, which gave him firsthand insight into the poor treatment of people with disabilities.



"When my daughter was born, I felt I was born into a new world," he said, lamenting that people with disabilities are often marginalized by the wider community. "People with disabilities have feelings and personalities just like everyone else."

Sweeney noted the positive work CAU does.

"They're changing lives for people with disabilities and parents," he said. "They're making a difference, and we in the state have to support them. We need to value the people who serve our loved ones and treat them with respect."

Nicholas Scutari, who has long supported CAU dating back to his time as a Union County Freeholder and Freeholder Chairman, also applauded the agency for its efforts. "Community Access is doing a marvelous job in an area that is sorely underserved," he said. "We need these types of agencies to do the job that government doesn't do, to help underserved individuals as they do here."

*CAU Office Manager, Laura Hankerson (left), is accompanied by Chris Zucosky, Ira Geller Award Winner and CAU Executive Director, Sidney Blanchard*

"Helping you achieve independence in the community... that's

**THEcau**  
ADVANTAGE

## A Message from our Executive Director

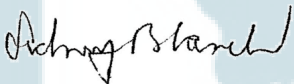


Our name – Community Access Unlimited – reflects our core mission: working to provide all members of society, regardless of ability or socio-economic standing, with unlimited access to an integrated and equal life within the community. Yet there can be no access to the community without community in every sense.

That is why we have always looked beyond our doors and our members to the wider community – building bridges and networks that enable us to fulfill our mission and help others do the same. By helping to build a better community, we are creating pathways for our members integrate and find acceptance and fulfillment. As you read through the pages of this *Independent Citizen*, you will see the many examples of our community engagement.

Our Gala is a celebration of those in the community who help us fulfill our mission. On page 3, you will read about a grant we received from Valley National Bank Foundation, one of our valued community partners. The theme of our Annual Day of Prayer this year was "Striving to Make a Beloved Community (page 4), bolstered by our message of unity, embracement of diversity and goodwill toward others. Our annual Ira Geller Memorial Walk-a-Thon (page 5) brings together our members, staff and members of the wider community for a day of exercising both our bodies and minds. The annual Union County Youth Services Networking Conference draws youth services professionals from throughout the county while the annual Youth Conference brings together youth themselves for a day of unity (see page 6 for both). A recent visit from FedEx for FedEx Cares Day delivered integration for both our members and the FedEx employees who visited.

Community is the bedrock upon which we built CAU. Help us continue celebrating it.



Sidney Blanchard, Executive Director



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& Nicholas Scalera**

## Board Member Spotlight: Tendai Ndoro, PhD

Tendai Ndoro, PhD, has been a member of CAU's Board of Trustees for eight years. She serves as the Director of the Rutgers Small Business Development Center, which provides counseling and training to small business and start-ups. She also is the founder of The Strategic Leadership Institute in Public and Private Affairs, where she leverages her experiences in global management consulting.

Tendai is very in tune with the needs of people with disabilities and served on the Special Education PTO in the South Orange-Maplewood School District prior to joining the CAU Board. She is glad she added CAU to her personal mission.

"This is something personal and dear to me," she said. "I believe in the mission and the way we achieve things. The mission is what attracted me." Tendai also was impressed with the way CAU has always focused on providing sustainable housing for people with disabilities and linking to other nonprofits and agencies.





Chris Zucosky's business has been providing CAU with janitorial supplies for more than 20 years. He supports CAU in a number of ways, including contributing to and attending CAU's annual Walk-a-Thon, golf outing and theater production, among other activities. "It's a great organization," he said. "I really respect what they're doing. I have a lot of friends who have children with disabilities, and it's a great way for them to see how their kids can be involved with the community."

CAU also presented the annual Colleen Fraser Award certificates and \$1,000 scholarships to two members, Steven Agolia and Alejandro Amaya, who will put the funding toward their efforts in advocacy for people with disabilities and at-risk youth.

Major financial sponsors of the Gala included: BCB Community Bank; Inglesino, Webster, Wyciskala & Taylor, Santander Bank, & Valley National Bank.



### *Valley National Bank Keeps a Roof Over Our Heads*

When heavy rains led to significant water damage at one of CAU's TOP properties, our long-time supporter, Valley National Bank, came to the rescue with a \$10,000 grant. The money will partially offset the cost of repairs to the roof, helping keep rent for this housing affordable.

"The ongoing financial support we receive from Valley National Bank has long been important in implementing CAU's long-term housing goals," said CAU Executive Director, Sid Blanchard. "But in this case, they also came to the rescue on a short-term need, yet one that immediately impacted our members. We can't thank them enough."

#### **- JANUARY -**

**January 8, 6:00 PM—8:00 PM**  
Helping Hands Self Advocacy at the  
CAU Main Office

**January 11, 7:30 PM—9:30 PM**  
4th Annual Collaborative  
Community Concert  
Wilkins Theatre at Kean University

**January 22 & 24 (6:30 PM - 8:00 PM)**  
**January 26, (10:00 AM - 12:00 PM)**  
Auditions for Hairspray Jr., CAU Main Office

#### **- FEBRUARY -**

**February 6, 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM**  
Helping Hands Self Advocacy at the  
CAU Main Office

**February 9, 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM**  
NJ Youth Orchestra  
Performance  
At the CAU Main Office

**February 21, 7:30 PM—9:00 PM**  
CAU Cabaret at the CAU Main Office

#### **- MARCH -**

**March 5, 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM**  
Helping Hands Self Advocacy at the  
CAU Main Office

**March 16, 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM**  
Women in Faith Conference at the  
CAU Main Office

**For More Information on Upcoming Events**  
**Visit our website at [www.caunj.org](http://www.caunj.org)**



## Striving to Make a Beloved Community

Hundreds gathered at St. Bartholomew of the Apostle Church in Scotch Plains this fall for the fifth annual Union County Day of Prayer. With the theme "Striving to Make a Beloved Community," the evening delivered a variety of messages centering on unity, embracement of diversity and goodwill toward others.

Each year, the Day of Prayer brings together leaders and individuals from across the spectrum of religious identity. Sharmila D. Jaipersaud, an attorney, represented Hinduism. "Division is simple," she said.

"We can see the differences between us. When you have an interfaith gathering like this and we can come together to pray, it shows those who are against us we are unified."

Navdeep Tucker, a Sikh from DashMesh Barbar Gurudwara in Carteret, read two passages from the scriptures. "The first describes (the Sikh) belief in the attributes of God," he said. "The second relates to the different ways people worship, but how we're all seeking a relationship with God."

The Rev. John Paladino of St. Bartholomew touched on the dividing forces that work against community values. Other speakers echoed Paladino's theme. "Interfaith and the idea of unity of all people is an essential principal of our practice," said Michael Petkov, a Buddhist with the New Jersey chapter of Soka Gakkai International. "All people have the Buddhist nature, this higher condition of life and the ability to make all people happy."

Zagham Chaudry of the Muslim Community Center of Union County, said, "Interfaith is extremely important, especially in these times. People are comfortable in their communities and with like-minded people -- but when you interact with other people with other backgrounds, you realize they are not so different from you."

The annual Day of Prayer is organized by the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council (UCICC), which promotes inclusion of all people within the community and creates a clearinghouse of faith-based, non-profit and government community services available to the public.

CAU Executive Director Sid Blanchard said people with disabilities experience the greatest level of discrimination in this nation, and the UCICC was founded in part so CAU members would have greater access to houses of worship where they would be welcomed. "Our mission is to help people with disabilities and young people become part of the community," he said. "To be able to do that, we have to have a community. If one person is excluded, everyone is excluded."



*Members of the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council and others who took part in the fifth annual Union County Day of Prayer.*



*(Above) Members of CAU enjoy the event. (Middle) The audience enjoyed a performance from the students of the Muslim Community Center of Union County (Bottom) St. Bartholomew was filled with attendees at this year's Day of Prayer.*





## 2018 Walk-a-thon Goes the Distance

More than 500 CAU members, staff and community partners went the distance at this year's 2018 Annual Ira Geller Memoriam Walk-a-Thon, helping to raise more than \$64,000 for CAU programs and services. The walk took place at Oak Ridge Park in Clark.

"Our Annual Walk-a-Thon is named for our long-time member Ira Geller, who was a champion advocate for people with disabilities," said Cara Clair, CAU Director of Fundraising. "That is so fitting, because our walk is so much more than a fundraising effort. It is a gathering of the CAU community all working together for the good of all our members."

Major financial supporters of the event included Investors Bank & Union County Board of Freeholders.



*Sergio Granados (right), Chairman of the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders, poses with Frank Barile, a CAU member.*



*(Left) Danielle DeCurtis dances with CAU staff members at the Walk.*

*(Below) CAU Members take a walk around the park in honor of the day!*

*Walking hand in hand: Members and staff stroll, roll and walk to the finish line just in time for a picnic lunch*



## Grooming Future Nonprofit Leaders



*Joining CAU staff members and program graduates Jasmine Coleman (second from left) and Tyechia Wade (second from right) were (left to right) Union County Freeholder Angel Estrada, Freeholder Chairman Sergio Granados, CAU's Joanne Oppelt and Freeholder Bruce Bergen.*

The future leaders of Union County's nonprofit community were celebrated this fall at the graduation of the inaugural class of the Union County Non-Profit Leadership Fellows Institute. The goal of the institute, which was seeded with a \$5,000 grant from the Union County Board of Freeholders, is to develop the next generation of informed and effective executives in the nonprofit sector.

The institute's Class of 2018 comprised 24 social services professionals from an array of the county's nonprofit organizations, including two from CAU. Aiming to ensure ongoing leadership development within the agency, CAU also created its own Leadership Institute that allowed 22 additional employees to follow a similar curriculum as those participating in the county program.



## Story of Tragedy and Redemption

Twelve pairs of shoes lined the stage at the 2018 Union County Youth Services Networking Conference, several once belonging to teenagers who took their own lives. Keynote speaker Tricia Baker, whose son, Kenny, died by suicide in 2010, told the youth services professionals in the room that the young people in their care often have no one to talk to when in crisis, but they, the attendees, can be those ears.

The annual Union County Youth Services Networking Conference, held at CAU, is sponsored by the Union County Youth Services Steering Committee. The conference is an opportunity for youth services professionals from throughout the county to come together, hear the stories of others, attend roundtable discussions and receive valuable updates.

## ...and Challenges and Success

Michael Williams, Jr. stood before 200 youths at CAU's 2018 Annual Youth Conference and struggled to begin his story. Michael, a community organizer, behaviorist and licensed social worker at CAU, is proud of what he has accomplished in life, but less so of the decisions he made as a youth.

He told the youths he grew up in Trenton surrounded by poverty, drugs and gangs. He and his friends assaulted people for sport. He witnessed one friend get attacked with a machete and another get shot. He attended four high schools in five years and was expelled from the last one for stealing and cheating.



Cassandra Jeffers and Khalil Cromwell (right) pose with keynote speaker Michael Williams, Jr.



Tricia Baker, co-founder of *Attitudes in Reverse*, addresses the audience with shoes of teenagers who died by suicide on stage

He decided to complete high school and go to college. He entered Bloomfield College, made the dean's list and earned a bachelor's degree, then a master's degree in social work.

"I didn't make it through school because I was smart or had all the answers," he said. "I made it through school because I went to class and did the work. Had I not had a support group, I would not have been able to get here."

As Michael spoke, many of the youth in the audience nodded their heads. Their support groups include the agencies that care for them. CAU's Annual Youth Conference is an opportunity for youth from CAU and other agencies throughout the state to come together and share experiences and learn.

**Be a part of something wonderful!**



Open Auditions will be held on  
January 22, January 24, and January 26 for Hairspray Jr!

Actors of all ages & abilities are encouraged to audition.

For more information, please contact us at  
info@caunj.org or 908-354-3040 x4376



## Celebrating Employment for People with Disabilities

Brenda Peguero, manager of the Wendy's restaurant in Hillside, hired CAU member Robert Capello as a greeter. It was not long before his work ethic and reliability convinced her to increase his responsibilities. Now Robert cleans tables, sweeps floors and refills utensils and ice.

"Robert is very nice and sweet," Brenda said. "He works well with others and interacts with the customers well. Customers even ask for him when he's not here."

CAU celebrated National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October, lauding the proven benefits to employers of hiring people with disabilities, including better attendance and retention, greater safety, enhanced diversity and tax breaks.

CAU maintains a robust employment services department for its members. More than 50 CAU members are employed, with service time ranging from one to more than 30 years. Employment partners include Walmart, ShopRite, Target, Marshall's, Whitson Culinary Group, the Humane Society and Wendy's.

Robert said he loves working. "I like working with people and the customers," he said. "I get along with my coworkers, and my supervisor says I'm a very hard worker."



*(Left) Andrea Byrd, Employment Counselor at CAU  
(Center) Robert Capello, and  
(Right) Brenda Peguero, manager at Wendy's restaurant in Hillside.*

## FedEx Delivers for CAU Members

CAU member Joao Sialho beamed in delight from his wheelchair as the basketball left his hand and, with an assist from a man in a purple shirt, dropped through the hoop. The man in purple was one of more than 60 FedEx employees visiting CAU's Cranford facility on FedEx Cares Day, part of the company's FedEx Cares program through which employees volunteer to support community causes.

"We identify and visit organizations where we feel we can have an impact," said Sam Nesbit of FedEx.

FedEx chose CAU because one of its managers was familiar with the agency, according to FedEx's Paula Krysa. "We saw what a wonderful organization they are and how passionate and involved the staff are," she said. "We just knew we had the right organization."

The FedEx employees spent the day interacting with and entertaining CAU members with a variety of activities, including games such as basketball shooting, spa day, karaoke and the history of FedEx, which also touched on employment. FedEx delivered!

*CAU member Joao Sialho plays basketball with FedEx Volunteers at FedEx Cares Day*



*CAU members Giovanni Mancini and James Maccia (second from right and right) receive hand massages from two FedEx volunteers at the Spa Day portion of the day.*







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**Community Access Unlimited's Mission:** *Our mission is to provide community access through effective, systematic, comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and their families, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives as citizens integrated into the general community. Services also include the provision of decent housing preferably income integrated and affordable to low and moderate-income people.*

*Save the Date!*

# CAU Annual Golf Classic

**Thursday, May 9, 2019**

**Suburban Golf Club, Union NJ**

*Visit our website for Sponsorship & Advertising Opportunities*

[www.caunj.org](http://www.caunj.org)

