

SCHOOL SUPERSTARS



BY BEN CHAPMAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

They're the heroes you've never heard of — until now.

Some of the most influential people in New York City schools will be honored Wednesday when 11 teachers, principals and counselors are celebrated as the 2016 Daily News Hometown Heroes in Education.

New Yorkers nominated exceptional educators of all stripes who each gave their all — and then some — to help city students reach their dreams.

The pool of more than 200 nominees for the 2016 awards came from public, charter and parochial schools across the five boroughs.

"The Daily News created the Hometown Heroes in Education Awards to recognize the exemplary efforts of our city's educators," said Daily News Editor-in-Chief Jim Rich. "The event also gives us an opportunity to remember and reflect on those teachers who made such a positive difference in our own lives."

"To be able to acknowledge and honor these kinds of invaluable educators is one of the most rewarding jobs I have as editor-in-chief," Rich added.

The fourth annual awards breakfast will celebrate each of the honorees.

The inspiring educators will share the spotlight with esteemed presenters, including Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña, hip-hop pioneer Darryl (DMC) McDaniels of Run-DMC and WNBC News anchor David Ushery.

Mayor de Blasio said it's about time city educators got their due.

"Educators are everyday heroes who make extraordinary impacts on the lives of the students they mentor and teach," de Blasio said. "I join the New York Daily News in taking a moment to recognize the remarkable and noble work of our hometown heroes

YOU CAN LEARN A LOT FROM THEM

Hailing best of the city's school system



Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña and Mayor de Blasio (below) will present, and NY1 anchor Pat Kiernan (opposite page, top) will emcee at the Daily News Hometown Heroes in Education Awards Wednesday.



and thank them for all that they do."

Popular NY1 anchor Pat Kiernan is set to serve in his fourth year as emcee for the

event, where the accomplishments of these unsung heroes will be recognized.

"It's nice to get away from the endless discussions about

how dissatisfied we are with the country's current generation of leaders and spend some time thinking about the next generation," Kiernan said.

"What's most remarkable about our honorees is that they bring their enthusiasm to every school year like it was their first."

The winners are slated to share their heartwarming stories at the Edison Ballroom in Times Square.

United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew said the winning educators are already heroes to their students.

"This fact was proven again last week when I asked an auditorium full of elementary students a very simple question: Who here loves their teacher? You could hear the roar down the block," Mulgrew said.

"Hometown Heroes is a chance for the rest of us to say



JUDGES



NY1 morning anchor
Pat Kiernan



Schools Chancellor
Carmen Fariña



State Board of Regents
Chancellor Betty Rosa



Council of School Supervisors
and Administrators President
Ernest Logan



New York City Charter
School Center CEO
James Merriman



Parent activist
Nancy Cauthen



Parent activist
Tracy Woodall



United Federation of
Teachers President
Michael Mulgrew



CUNY and Brooklyn
College Education Prof.
David Bloomfield



Daily News
Editor-in-Chief Jim Rich



City University of
New York Chancellor
James Milliken



Harlem Children's
Zone President
Geoffrey Canada



Daily News education
reporter Ben Chapman

‘thank you’ to the people who make our students feel safe, special and ready to take on the world.”

An esteemed panel of judges, including Fariña, carefully examined the entries to come up with the winners.

The winners were chosen at a lively lunch meeting at The News’ lower Manhattan headquarters.

“New York City educators work tirelessly to put New York City’s children on the path to a bright future, and ensure equity and excellence for all students, families and community members,” Fariña said of the educators considered by the judges.

“I thank the Daily News for sharing these inspiring stories and honoring these incredible professionals.

I know thousands of New Yorkers will join in celebrating their accomplishments,” she added.

Ernest Logan, head of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, said the educators recognized in the awards contribute to the work that sends millions of city kids to successful careers.

“We ask so much of our educators,” Logan said. “The hours are long, the workload demanding, criticism constant. Yet these heroes we honor today bear those responsibilities and more to make sure the young people who they teach and lead flourish like flowers in the rain. They secure our nation’s future by making sure our children have the tools to build their own.”

PRESENTERS



Mayor
de Blasio



Television journalist
Brenda Blackmon



Schools Chancellor
Carmen Fariña



NBC News anchor
David Ushery



Darryl McDaniels (DMC)
of Run-DMC



TV and radio personality
Funkmaster Flex



City University of
New York Chancellor
James Milliken



Radio personality
Luis Jimenez



CBS2 anchor
Mary Calvi



Telemundo News an-
chor Odalys Molina



WNBC anchor
Stefan Holt

AND THE WINNERS ARE ... ELEVEN CITY EDUCATORS WHO CARE



KEVIN O'CONNOR

It was a deep-rooted empathy for his students that helped make the late Kevin O'Connor a beloved social studies teacher and dean.

But it came at a high price. O'Connor struggled with alcohol and drug addiction in his younger years, according to his daughter Kristen Rajak. Those struggles enabled him to understand the challenges his students faced.

"Empathy as an addict made him be able to reach out to kids," Rajak, 30, told the Daily News. "He always found a way to relate to their situations."

O'Connor died in his sleep in April at 61, leaving a heartbroken trail of family, friends and students. Over the last 19 years, he taught at a pair of Queens schools — Francis Lewis High School in Fresh Meadows and Campus Magnet High School in Cambria Heights.

He had planned to retire after turning 62 later this year.

"The kids loved him," said colleague Arthur Goldstein, who nominated O'Connor for a posthumous Daily News Hometown Heroes in Education award.

"He accepted everybody and was kind to everybody."

Goldstein said he was "blown away" by the emotional response of O'Connor's students during a ceremony in the courtyard of Francis Lewis High School after his death.

Hundreds of students turned out, and one young woman played a Pink Floyd song in his honor, noting O'Connor had encouraged her to take up the guitar.

Another, too sad to speak, sketched a portrait of O'Connor.

"Teachers are all measured by a checklist called the Danielson Framework, but it was evident to everyone that Mr. O'Connor, in his capacity as dean, did 100 things for kids that no administrator measures," Goldstein said.

JOAN INDART-ETIENNE



SUSAN WATTS/DAILY NEWS

For more than 25 years, ReStart Academy principal Joan Indart-Etienne has helped young students living on the margins of the academic world.

The diverse group includes over-age students, teen parents and young people receiving treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues, all fighting to complete their education.

"I always thought they were overlooked," Indart-Etienne said at her Hell's Kitchen office. "People didn't pay attention to these students. I always felt like it was my moral obligation to help them."

ReStart is one of the city Department of Education's alternative school programs in District 79. It focuses on students between 13 and 21 who face obstacles to finish their studies.

"I have great assistant principals and teachers," she said. "They are very passionate about this."

Following the success of her program, the city Education Department recently tapped Indart-Etienne to bring her expertise to the East River Academy at Rikers Island as a "master ambassador principal."

"She always matches teenagers with engaging school programs, always ensuring ReStart Academy provides social, emotional support for all students," said Timothy Lisante, superintendent for alternative schools and programs at District 79.

Indart-Etienne grew up in Puerto Rico and came to the U.S. as a teen, settling with her family in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn.

She believes the young inmates at Rikers deserve the same opportunities as other students.

"Just because they are there doesn't mean they should be deprived," said the 48-year-old mother of two.



THEODORE PARISSIENNE

TAMMY KATAN-BROWN

Nearly 36% of the students at Public School 398 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, live in temporary housing, and Principal Tammy Katan-Brown never knows whether they will be there for a few weeks or several years.

But under Katan-Brown's dedicated leadership, the staff at PS 398 make sure all of their students have whatever they need for a good day in class.

Some days that means extra books. Other times, it means a new toothbrush and a fresh set of school clothes.

"It's a challenge, but I feel every child is entitled to have a book in front of them," said Katan-Brown, who took over as principal in 2012.

"We want to ensure that children feel comfortable and parents feel comfortable. We want them to know this is a safe haven and their children are fine with us."

Katan-Brown and her staff dip into their own pockets to buy

clothes and supplies for youngsters often shuttled from one apartment to the next.

"We don't want children to feel differently," she said. "No one will know they are residing in temporary housing."

She also works with community organizations to bring parents resources such as high school equivalency and financial literacy workshops along with after-school programs for kids.

"Another major problem when you have transitional kids is they don't always have a sound educational foundation," Katan-Brown said. "We provide a lot of academic intervention."

She partnered with community-based organizations to establish after-school programs that help kids with homework and provide meals.

"We are making gains," she said. "It's challenging, but rewarding. I'm here and I love it."

The
UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
salutes the
Daily News
**EDUCATION HOMETOWN
HEROES**



United Federation of Teachers *A Union of Professionals*
52 Broadway, New York, NY 10004 212.777.7500 www.uft.org
Michael Mulgrew, *President*

DAVID WEXLER



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

MICHELLE EISENBERG

There were no support groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender students at the Academy for Young Writers in East New York, Brooklyn, when Michelle Eisenberg joined the school in 2012.

Now, the Brooklyn public school's first Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA), co-founded by Eisenberg, is recognized as one of the best in the country.

Under Eisenberg's leadership, the student group won the award for excellence from the national Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network in May and was honored again at the city schools' first-ever LGBT Pride celebration June 21.

"We've done everything from host a pronoun awareness day to a pride celebration," said Eisenberg, an English teacher. "These students are really becoming a group of national activists at this point."

In less than four years, she's taken the two dozen kids to the LGBTQ Center in Brooklyn, the Stonewall Inn, the Big Gay Ice Cream Shop and

other LGBT hot spots.

She's also developed a comprehensive schoolwide anti-bullying policy that her boosters say is reshaping conversations around homophobia and transphobia all over the city.

"It's the long-term solution instead of the short term Band-Aid where that problem is going to pop up again," Eisenberg said of her efforts.

Eisenberg was also the first teacher at the Academy for Young Writers — which has students from sixth to 12th grade — to come out as gay.

Now Eisenberg is on an even larger mission. She is helping other New York City schools create their own Gender-Sexuality Alliance groups, and is frequently sought out by teachers and administrators from other schools.

"It can be very emotional but I think sometimes it's what gets me going to work every day," Eisenberg said. "It gives meaning and reason to why I went into education."

DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN/DAILY NEWS



ELIOT WEISS

There's a lot of laughter in math teacher Eliot Weiss' classroom at Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn.

The veteran educator prides himself on having a strong rapport with his students — as well as high expectations. But make no mistake, he's putting the mirth back into math class.

"We're going to have a lot of fun but they need to be on their toes and be prepared," said Weiss, 62. "They all know I am very serious about teaching."

Weiss has worked at the Midwood school for 35 years, handling such rigorous courses as Advanced Placement calculus and algebra II.

During that time, he also helped build the school's chess team into state and national champions.

"My attitude towards mathematics was completely transformed by this man, who made math seem like magic — elegant, intricate,

omnipresent," said former student Olga Zhurakivska, who nominated Weiss for a Daily News Hometown Heroes in Education award.

Weiss, the father of two children, grew up in Brooklyn and studied psychology and mathematics in college.

"It's not just math, I love teaching," said Weiss, whose former students include Oscar-winning actress Marisa Tomei and "Black Swan" director Darren Aronofsky. "In class we also talk about history and science and literature."

The school's chess club became a dynasty, collecting state and national titles. The team members met President George W. Bush in the Oval Office in 2004 and were the subject of a book, "Game of Kings."

"Chess relates so closely to life," said Weiss. "You have to think about what you will be doing, how you will execute it and evaluate what you did."



DELFINA CHEUNG

Math and English as a second language teacher Delfina Cheung was still a teenager in the Philippines when she realized she had a future in teaching.

Educational options in Cheung's hometown were slim for her younger sister, who has Down syndrome. So Cheung spent hours helping her learn the basics of math and reading.

"I have a lot of patience," said Cheung, 62, an instructor William McKinley Junior High School 259 in Brooklyn. "Every day we did drills."

That patience would come in handy years later when she came to the U.S. as a teacher. Although she applied for a job as a math teacher, administrators were in desperate need of an English as a second language teacher for the growing number of Asian students coming to the school.

Noting her Chinese language skills, they offered Cheung a job as an ESL teacher. She later returned to teaching her first love — math.

"The kids could not speak a word of English, and I had to teach them everything," she said. "Some of them picked it up right away. It's amazing how they learn."

While teaching them reading, writing, math and social studies, Cheung made sure the youngsters were exposed to the culture in their new country. There were trips to Ellis Island, the American Museum of Natural History, South Street Seaport and other city sites.

The bonds she made with those first students have lasted more than 20 years. They return for birthday gatherings and visits to the school.

Former sixth-grade student Chih Ling Cheng called Cheung a "strict but loving teacher" who was an inspiration and a role model.

"I became a social worker because I want to help immigrant families," Cheng said. "I worked with youths in the Chinese community to help them find a mentor in life and encourage them to reach their goals."

SUSAN WATTS/DAILY NEWS



ADRIAN BROOKS

Smooth communication between parents and teachers is vitally important — as Adrian Brooks, an English Language Arts teacher at Bronx High School for Law and Community Service, knows firsthand.

Brooks was a bright, well-read teen in need of some guidance in school. But while his mother instilled the importance of an education, she struggled to help him with academics.

"There was so much my mom didn't know," said Brooks. "I realize as a teacher we need to focus on the students and their parents."

Now Brooks, 32, is making better teacher-parent communication his personal mission.

He helps guide his colleagues through the sometimes awkward phone conversations between teachers and parents. He's even working on several suggested

scripts they can use when preparing for those calls.

To coach his colleagues, Brooks tapped into the skills he honed during a part-time stint at a debt collection service during college.

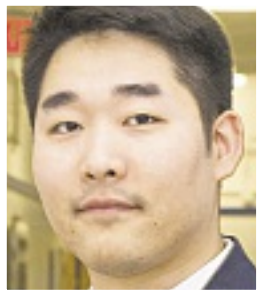
"I was the person who would call people and tell them how much they owe," he said. "They would routinely curse and yell at me and hang up on me. But I learned a lot of phone skills and how to negotiate with people."

Brooks grew up on Staten Island and in Hempstead, L.I., a voracious reader of comics books, novels and everything in between.

He gravitated toward education after college because he saw it as a way to help young people while using his love of the written word.

"I love being able to help kids — give them some sort of push and show them they have opportunities," he said.

HOWARD SIMMONS/DAILY NEWS



JUN YOON

Learning the art of debate helped Jun Yoon build his confidence and find his voice as a youngster.

Now the 26-year-old math teacher at Success Academy Harlem East is doing the same for his students as the coach of its debating team, which he built from scratch into a thriving group that performs well in national competitions.

Yoon came to the U.S. from Korea at age 8 and was a shy, quiet elementary school student. Most teachers didn't encourage him to speak up, he recalled.

"Having dedicated debate coaches who believed in me helped me break out of my shell," Yoon said.

Now, as a teacher, he has tried to focus on some of those shy students with potential.

"I saw the promise and went to recruit them," Yoon said. "There is charisma they have yet to unlock."

Yoon volunteers his time after

school and on weekends to help students attend and prepare for debating matches.

He also challenges his students in the classroom.

"Too often math is taught through worksheet after worksheet," Yoon said. "Here we are trying an innovative approach by encouraging our scholars to discuss problems."

For example, his seventh-grade students studied the use of ratio and proportions by examining the athletic feats of Usain Bolt, the Jamaican sprinter considered the fastest man in the world.

The debate team has grown in three years from just a few students to a strong group of 50. They've performed well at city, state and national competitions.

"It's seeing how the kids are able to grow and really discover themselves — who they are as people," he said. "That's the thing that drives me."

DAVID WEXLER



SHERRY BRANCH

Veteran school nurse Sherry Branch knows good health begins with good eating habits at home.

That's why, even after long school days of tending to youngsters at Public School 37 in Queens, she stays late and puts on her chef's hat.

Branch, 52, helps kids and their parents whip up fun and healthy meals in an after-school program focused on nutrition.

"My passion is food and kids," said Branch, who has worked at the school for 18 years. "I cook well and I eat well. I want these kids to have the same experience I have at home with my own children."

The mother of three, who grew up in Grenada and England, is a registered nurse with a master's degree in health education.

Her busy day includes helping students with chronic illnesses, such as asthma, who need

medication during the day. And then there is the steady stream of youngsters who walk into her office complaining about stomachaches and other ailments.

Branch is the force behind the school's Wellness Council and even secured several grants for kitchen appliances, food and a chef.

One class introduced kids to cuisines and cultures from around the world — including Mexico and Ethiopia.

They helped cook fish tacos, brown rice and macaroni and cheese with broccoli while learning about portion size.

She's hoping to find more grants to help the school expand a gardening program.

But sometimes her greatest rewards come from the small, colorful handwritten notes from her young charges.

"That is why I am here," she said. "I love my job."

DAVID WEXLER



SHAWN RUX

When Principal Shawn Rux arrived at Middle School 53 — a failing school in Far Rockaway, Queens — expectations were low and hope was in short supply.

But the seasoned educator was determined to make changes, even on that first day of school in 2011.

He reorganized the building so each grade had its own floor.

"Just that one simple change minimized a ton of issues," said Rux. "Staffers were congratulating me, saying there were no fights that day. I said there shouldn't be fights."

Rux set out to transform the culture of the school and turn it into a safe community hub.

"I believe all kids can be successful," said the father of four who grew up in Harrisburg, Pa. "They just need structures in place and people around them to have high expectations."

Rux keeps the school open until

6 p.m. during the week, as well as on Saturdays for a special weekend program. He introduced a robust performing arts curriculum that gives students a wide variety of choices such as step, drum, dance and chorus.

Students can earn "Rux Bux" for a high test score, helping keep friends out of trouble or even plucking trash off the school floor.

Students can cash in their Rux Bux for pencils, notebooks and cookies or save them for a special dress-down day or other treat.

While attendance improved and suspensions dropped, Rux acknowledged more work is needed. Few students in the school tested proficient in math and English on state tests.

"I want my kids to continue to believe in themselves," said Rux. "I want to instill high expectations in every aspect of their lives."

GO NAKAMURA



YVON MILIEN

A diverse academic background gave special education teacher Yvon Milien a unique way to connect with his students.

Milien teaches students at the Brooklyn School for Career Development in Prospect Heights math, science, art and social studies by having them recreate architectural sites both famous and ordinary.

And he has no question that his students, who range from 13 to 21, have the ability to handle the rigorous lessons even though many of the teens have emotional, physical and cognitive disabilities.

"It's a really challenging job because you never know if they are having a good day or a bad day," Milien said. "And it takes a lot of patience to draw lines and design a floor plan. But I see a big difference after just a few months."

Milien came to the U.S. from Haiti in 1991. He studied civil engineering and went on to receive master's

degrees in education, international relations, sociology and public administration.

He started teaching 14 years ago as a temporary job and never left.

"Everybody keeps asking me why I stay in teaching," said Milien. "I wanted to do something to give back to the community."

He admits students can be intimidated at first, but usually relax when they realize the classwork also allows them to use their imagination.

Along the way, they are strengthening language skills and putting geometry lessons to use.

The resulting artwork includes models of The Brooklyn Art Gallery, a skyscraper in Dubai and a student's dream home.

"I try to encourage them and give them hope," Milien said. "And then that moment when you see them get it — the 'aha' moment — that makes me feel very fulfilled."

DREAMS DO COME TRUE

Orubba Almansouri
City College of New York/CUNY
Salutatorian 2016
B.A., English and History

HER STORY

Almansouri, in a graduation speech that moved Michelle Obama to invite her to a White House summit on women, told how she broke barriers that kept traditional Yemeni girls out of school.

AWARDS

Winner, Mellon Mays Fellowship
Winner, Colin Powell Fellowship

GOAL

Master's in Near Eastern Studies, then a Ph.D.

PHOTO BY ANDRÉ N. BECKLES/CUNY

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CUNY★AMERICAN DREAM MACHINE

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK-1847 HUNTER COLLEGE-1870 BROOKLYN COLLEGE-1930 QUEENS COLLEGE-1937
NEW YORK CITY COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY-1946 COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND-1956 BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1957 QUEENSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1959
CUNY GRADUATE CENTER-1961 BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1963 KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1963 JOHN JAY COLLEGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE-1964
YORK COLLEGE-1966 BARUCH COLLEGE-1968 LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1968 LEHMAN COLLEGE-1968 HOSTOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE-1970
MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE-1970 CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW-1983 MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE AT CUNY-2001 CUNY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM-2006
CUNY SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES-2006 GUTTMAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE-2011 CUNY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH POLICY-2016 CUNY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE-2016

HEROES OF EDUCATION