

Healthcare HEROES

2024

Westchester Magazine celebrates these 15 outstanding people (plus canine!) who have tirelessly dedicated themselves to improving the quality of life around the county — and beyond.

By **Jessica Jafet, Tina Nouri-Mahdavi, Regina Molaro, and Amy Sowder**

Leslie Geist and Echo

Pet Therapy Volunteers, Good Dog Foundation

When Echo, a black Labrador retriever, climbed into bed with a comatose older patient near the end of her life, her eyes flashed open, and she giggled while pet therapy volunteer Leslie Geist and the patient's family watched. She passed away later that night, hours after that moment of joy and comfort.

"He just knows what people need; he's very intuitive. You see the joy he's bringing, and it just brings so much joy to me," Geist says.

Trained and certified through the Good Dog Foundation, Echo and his human, Geist, visit patients ranging from 7-week-old babies to those in their 90s at WMCH Health hospitals, Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, and St. Vincent's Hospital Westchester. Since December 2022, they've worked in almost every hospital unit but focus especially on palliative care, end-of-life care, neuro units, and those with mental and developmental disabilities.

In one year, WMCH Health has grown from one to seven pet therapy teams, using Geist and Echo as their mentors. They added Crisis Response certification to their resume to assist during local and national disasters, which can help WMCH Health as a level 1 trauma center.

The team also participated in a neuro unit study to track the effects of pet therapy on those with brain injuries.





Dr. Gary Zeitlin

Director of Infectious Disease,
White Plains Hospital

In recent years, the world has certainly witnessed the vital role infection prevention plays in keeping communities safe. Dr. Gary Zeitlin's keen ability to monitor, respond, and implement strategies went a long way in helping White Plains Hospital navigate a challenging time.

"During COVID, Zeitlin was a bedrock of clinical and regulatory knowledge upon which the hospital was able to maintain the dynamic and rapidly changing standards of care for our patients," says Dr. John Cardasis, the hospital's director of critical care.

Inspired by his father, a neurologist, Zeitlin has made it his personal mission to provide optimal, efficient, and uncompromising patient care. His commitment has garnered many accolades for White Plains Hospital.

Beyond earning The Gold Seal of Approval from The Joint Commission, the hospital received two consecutive 5-Star ratings from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Zeitlin's contributions also helped White Plains Hospital achieve a distinction as the only hospital in Westchester County and the Hudson Valley — and one of only three hospitals in New York — to earn 10 consecutive "A" ratings from healthcare watchdog The Leapfrog Group.



Janet Anne Herbold

Physical Therapist, Vice President of Post Acute Services at Burke Rehabilitation

After 31 years at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital in White Plains, Janet Herbold has made a lasting impact — not only as a clinician, but also as an administrator and champion for the entire field of medical and physical rehabilitation.

"We try to give people their independence and their lives back," says Herbold, vice president of post-acute services.

The 150-bed, nationally ranked, acute rehabilitation hospital provides inpatient and outpatient services for people after an injury or surgery and for those managing symptoms from chronic conditions.

A seasoned physical therapist, Herbold identifies patients who would benefit from Burke's level of care, advocates for insurance coverage, and lobbies at the state and federal levels for all aspects of rehabilitative care for patients.

"We are really trying to restore hope and help patients transition from the acute care hospital, through Burke, and then back home to the community," Herbold says. "While they might not get back to where they were previously, we want them to know that there are people rooting for them, and who are really trying to help them be as functionally independent as possible."



Dr. Neil W. Schluger

Dean of the School of Medicine, New York Medical College

Through his work, Dr. Neil Schluger has helped elevate the health of countless people worldwide.

Before 2013, Ethiopia had only one pulmonologist to serve its population of 110 million people. Many have tuberculosis and other forms of lung disease. Thanks in part to Schluger, the country now has a pulmonary division at one of its hospitals and more than 20 qualified attending physicians.

It was his role as founder and director of the East Africa Training Initiative that led to the establishment of a medical fellowship program. The first of its kind in Ethiopia and the broader East African region, it provides world-class training in pulmonary and critical care.

"The program has succeeded in ways we had only dreamed about," Schluger says. The fellows regularly present at international meetings and publish original papers in peer-reviewed literature. They also created an organization that develops guidelines on lung health.

In his role at New York Medical College, Schluger oversees the education and training of more than 800 medical students and 350 residents and fellows. He is also the author of more than 200 articles, chapters, and books.



Vanessa Dias

Registered Nurse and Co-Founder, Able Athletics

Providing a critical platform for children with special needs, Able Athletics is replete with volunteers who donate their time to modify sports specifically to each athlete.

Vanessa Dias' idea was born during backyard activity with her three children, and it has expanded to a nationally known organization that aims not only to provide a space for adaptive sports but also to garner recognition for the cause in governing bodies of professional sports.

"It's exciting to see an idea, which came from two siblings who wanted to make a sport they loved accessible to their special-needs sister, extend to others," says Dias.

Able Athletics is going to the nationals for USA field hockey this year and recently received donations to purchase a fleet of 14 sports wheelchairs, which will provide even more opportunities for their participants. Dias has had a pivotal role in the world of adaptive sports, and her reach is only growing.



David Raizen

Paramedic and President, Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corps

While he was a teenager, David Raizen visited Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corps with a friend who was seeking certification in CPR and first aid. That experience is what inspired him to devote the next 47 years of volunteer service to Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corps. "Helping people is what drew me in," Raizen says.

The Corps provides 24-hour emergency medical care to Scarsdale and northern New Rochelle and serves as a mutual aid agency throughout Westchester. It is one of the few ambulance services in Westchester that always arrives on scene with paramedics who are trained in advanced life support.

Raizen is particularly proud of the Corp's response to COVID. Aside from providing 911 ambulance service to the county, Raizen orchestrated the approval for COVID testing and vaccinations at Corps headquarters. With the help of volunteers, more than 22,000 residents from every town and village in Westchester took advantage of its services.

He also guided the Corps in creating a paramedicine program — one of only three of its kind in Westchester County. It enables paramedics and EMTs to visit patients' homes to assist with healthcare and offer preventive services. "The program has dramatically reduced the rate of readmittance to [White Plains Hospital]," says Raizen.



Katrina Aronoff

Registered Technologist in Radiation Therapy, EMT, Emergency Management Project Manager, Phelps Hospital Northwell Health

After working as a radiation therapist for almost 20 years, Katrina Aronoff wanted a new challenge. In 2020, she underwent a flawless transition to emergency management due to her Incident Command System experience with the US Coast Guard.

The most recent task was to help navigate a complex project to modernize Phelps' electrical systems. The task, which calls for planned electrical shutdowns, requires meticulous planning and grace under pressure. "I take great pride in the planning, mitigation, and implementation of the impacts caused by these shutdowns. We accomplish this by engaging with staff early in the planning stages to understand their concerns, conduct informational meetings, and solicit feedback from the impacted users upon completion to identify opportunities for improvement in anticipation of the next project," she says.

Aronoff led a Q&A session during a Human Trafficking Awareness Fireside Chat, an atrocity experienced by more than 27 million people in the US in 2021.

This shining star also serves in the USCG Reserves as a Petty Officer 2nd Class Health Services Technician and has deployed several times for hurricanes and operations as an independent duty corpsman. Awards include the USCG Commendation and Achievement Medal.



Marie Johnson

Executive Director, SPRYE

Nothing replaces human contact. People require others to thrive.

Marie Johnson, executive director of SPRYE, strives every day to end the isolation of our county's oldest adults while maintaining their independence through the aging-in-place support organization for members in Rye, Harrison, Port Chester, and Rye Brook.

"I just really enjoy working with older adults to let them know they're still vital," Johnson says. "I want to reach out and engage with them, show them some support and things they can do, and make sure they know they're not forgotten. Because they're not. They're a big part of the fabric of our lives."

Johnson keeps in close contact with SPRYE's 88 to 120 members, all 55 and older, creating programs and inviting them to activities — such as book clubs, AI presentations by college professors, exercise classes, card clubs, a talk by Leonard Bernstein's daughter Jamie, a Metropolitan Museum of Art visit, and trips to the movies. She will do reminder calls before events and help resolve any snags in their plans to attend.

Johnson makes sure they have rides to essential doctor's appointments and will arrange holiday meal deliveries and birthday cakes. She helps provide scholarships for members in senior or low-income housing, where SPRYE will bring programs on-site.



Tracy Holt-McCook

Registered Nurse, Montefiore Mount Vernon Hospital

The foundation of Tracy Holt-McCook's 37-year career as a registered nurse has been built on healthcare justice. Born and raised in Mount Vernon, Holt-McCook chose to remain in her hometown to serve the needs of community members at what is now called Montefiore Mount Vernon Hospital.

"I've always strived to deliver comprehensive, compassionate and equitable healthcare regardless of your race, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or educational background," Holt-McCook says. "I've seen the need for affordable and equitable access to healthcare. I love being a nurse, and I know many people in the community." Many patients who come to the hospital know Holt-McCook by name and rely on her for medical advice, comfort, and counsel as they confront healthcare decisions.

This dedicated professional extends her time and expertise beyond her patients as a longtime advocate for her fellow nurses. Holt-McCook serves as the union president of the New York State Nurses Association for the Mount Vernon hospital and recently fought successfully on behalf of her staff in contract negotiations.

Susan Moscou

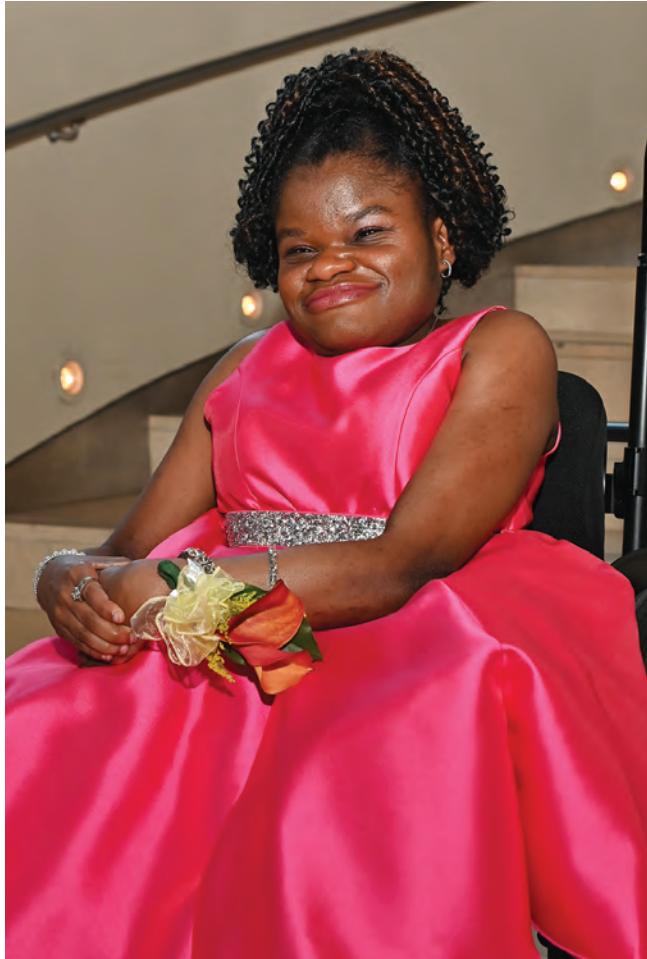
**Family Nurse Practitioner and
Associate Dean for Nursing,
Mercy University School of Nursing**

Susan Moscou has made an immense impact on Westchester's healthcare, advocating for social justice as a family nurse practitioner and associate dean for nursing at Mercy University's nursing school. Her nursing career has focused on aiding the unhoused and medically underserved communities, and she furthers this work in her teaching, zeroing in on policy and the social determinants of health.

"My life has always been in the arena of social justice. My focus on health policy has allowed me to bring that passion for social justice and fairness to education to educate the next generation of nurses of all types in health policy," she says. Moscou helped initiate Mercy's family nurse practitioner program with a federally qualified healthcare center to ensure that newly graduated nurse practitioners could remain in primary care venues in Westchester's medically underserved communities. She secured National Health Service Corps scholarships for disadvantaged students, and she created the framework for the university's psychiatric mental health program.



Editor Picks:
Supporting the Front Lines



Stephanie Gabaud

**International Spokesperson and Ambassador,
Elizabeth Seton Children's Center**

Stephanie Gabaud, 26, has lived most of her life at Elizabeth Seton Children's Center, a specialty long-term pediatric care center, because of challenges such as spina bifida and Arnold-Chiari malformation.

She's since become the face of the aging-out crisis threatening lives like hers, raising awareness about the fast-growing, life-and-death crisis for young adults with medically complex conditions who no longer qualify for pediatric care at 21 years old.

"I speak for them, and I am their advocate. We really want these children to thrive," Gabaud says about the 169 children and young adults, only 15 of whom can communicate verbally.

Gabaud lobbied in Albany for a young-adult center with 96 beds. She shares suggestions about facility-wide programming and liaises with donors and community partners on tours. And this summer in White Plains, construction is slated to begin on the first-of-its-kind forever home for people 18 and older with severe and chronic medical conditions.



Joseph Pizzimenti

President, CClean Commercial Cleaning

The unsung heroes in healthcare are those who keep our county's hospitals, medical offices, and therapeutic private schools clean and sanitary. President of CClean, Joseph Pizzimenti has clients including two major healthcare systems and two of Westchester's hospitals, Shrub Oak International School, and Ability Beyond.

During COVID-19's peak and today, CClean conducts terminal cleanings — disinfecting a room from floor to ceiling. Since that time of supply shortages, Pizzimenti tripled his Chappaqua warehouse space to maintain a year's worth of alcohol-based sanitizers, masks, gloves, and paper products. "We'd rather purchase more than we need and keep it on hand, rather than wait for product," he says.

It's at a major financial cost, sometimes loss, but he never wants healthcare employees and patients to suffer the consequences of another supply-chain shortage.



Nicki Reno-Welt

Physician Assistant and Assistant Professor at Pace University

Nicki Reno-Welt was the first physician-assistant member of Physicians for Human Rights and helped create the first medical student-run human rights clinic at Weill Cornell Center for Human Rights, which evaluates survivors of torture seeking asylum in the US. She worked for Planned Parenthood before she was the state health department's Cancer Services Program clinical coordinator, helping 5,000 underserved patients a year in Westchester and six other counties.

Then Reno-Welt realized the best way to change a healthcare system founded on beliefs that harm people of color is by educating the next generation of healthcare providers: At least 50 percent of white medical students in a 2016 study had the false belief that Black patients feel less pain and have thicker skin than white patients, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

So, Reno-Welt joined Pace University's Physician Assistant Program, which has a unique focus on underserved populations, as an assistant professor. She's now the director of academic education in the program, partnering with Open Door Family Medical Center to provide students with experiential work with underserved populations.

"If I can open their minds, my class of 30, that race is not biologic at all, that will change the students," she says. "Teaching students this will be the only thing that will make a difference in healthcare disparities in the US. We've tried everything else. My hope is that my students will go out and advocate for their patients and give high quality care for everyone."



Prudence Bagampeshera

Direct Support Professional,
Cardinal McCloskey Community Services

The benefits that can result from the care of a skilled direct support professional — someone who helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities — cannot be overstated.

Daily, they show up to help establish and achieve new goals, while celebrating the abilities already within each person.

For 23 years, Prudence Bagampeshera has been a part of the staff of Cardinal McCloskey Community Services, a nonprofit organization that strives to protect the most vulnerable members of the community, ranging from those who have suffered neglect and trauma to adults with developmental disabilities.

Working in both the residential and day habilitation programs, Bagampeshera's approach is to treat everyone with kindness and warmth, with a goal of increasing the physical, emotional, and personal wellbeing of those entrusted in his care.

"I believe everybody has a chance to learn and grow," Bagampeshera says. "I'm trying to make sure everyone gets the right treatment they deserve. Many people push them back because of their disabilities; I believe it is better to listen and learn from everybody."



Dr. Jennifer H. Menell

Chairperson of Department of Radiology, Optum

Efficiency equals compassion in breast cancer healthcare — when done right.

As chairperson of Optum's Department of Radiology, Dr. Jennifer Menell knows how important early detection is, so she spearheaded a more streamlined mammography process to increase screening capacity and reduce office wait times, making the department more efficient and enabling more women to get mammograms.

"Within 72 hours, they get a text or email with a link that gives the patient their results," Menell says. She created a dedicated Breast Health Navigator role to support women with all breast imaging needs and concerns.

In Menell's clinical role, she reads about 100 cases per day, including mammograms, ultrasounds, breast MRIs, CT scans, and X-rays. She personally performs breast biopsies.

"The most challenging and fulfilling moments for me are when I have to tell women they have breast cancer," says Menell, who offers patients her cell phone number to ease anxieties after hours. "I give them the information they need, I listen, and if they cry, that's OK. I try to guide them through the process so they can relax and forge ahead."

As radiology chairperson, Menell addresses scheduling challenges and clinician queries, streamlines processes, and expedites patient care. She's also a member of Optum's Physician Retention & Recruitment Committee to improve morale, physician retention, recruitment, and culture.

Our Healthcare Heroes

These 15 amazing people (plus canine) have stepped up to make helping others a personal mandate. They may be your neighbors, healthcare providers, or leaders in the communities where you live and/or work. They represent the pillars of our community and are a key factor in the quality of life we have come to expect in Westchester County. We are privileged to have them among us and honored to showcase them to the grateful community they serve.

Our Method

We typically receive anywhere from 80 to 120 Healthcare Heroes nominations each year, submitted by family, friends, patients, coworkers, managers, hospital CEOs and presidents, and even public officials. After being vetted, that collection is distilled down to the 40 or 50 strongest nominations, representing a diverse roster that includes not only doctors and nurses but also therapists, executives, entrepreneurs, and public servants. From this group, our six judges independently select their top-tier candidates (Tier 1), along with three to five "alternates" (Tier 2), from single-blind, redacted nominations that reveal neither the names nor the current professional affiliations of the nominees. Then, a differentiated number of points is awarded to each selection, according to whether they are Tier 1 or Tier 2, with the top point-earners declared to be winners.

Our Judges

It is with the deepest gratitude that we acknowledge our blue-ribbon panel of judges — each an accomplished healthcare provider and a leader in the community. They are:

Robert W. Amler, MD, MBA New York Medical College, Vice President, Government Affairs; Dean of the School of Health Sciences and Practice and Institute of Public Health; Professor of Public Health, Pediatrics, and Environmental Health Science

Sherlita Amler, MD, MS Commissioner of Health, Westchester County

Kathy Reilly Fallon, MD Board-certified foot and ankle surgeon, Midtown Manhattan Health Center; Founder and Chairwoman, Heavenly Productions Foundation

Mary H. Gadomski, BSN, RN Executive Director, Montefiore Home Care

Don M. Starr, MD, Anesthesiologist and Sub Specialist Pediatric Anesthesiologist affiliated with White Plains Hospital.

Jessica Zwerling, MD, MS Director, Montefiore Hudson Valley Center of Excellence for Alzheimer's Disease; Professor of Neurology, Albert Einstein College of Medicine; Program Director, UCNS Geriatric Neurology Fellowship; Director, Memory Disorders Center at Blondell; Associate Director, Center for the Aging Brain; Clinical Director, Einstein Aging Study. 