

[Peacemaker Awards recognize anti-bullying, outreach work done by area students](#)

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GREENFIELD — The Interfaith Council of Franklin County and the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice honored 31 local students for their work fighting racism and bullying, spreading compassion, and acting as forces for positive change in their communities at the 24th annual Peacemaker Awards on Wednesday.

The first Peacemaker Awards ceremony was held in 2000 to highlight Franklin County teens who worked toward promoting non-violence, well-being and justice in the wake of the 1999 Columbine shooting and incidents of teen violence in Franklin County.

This year, Sen. Jo Comerford kicked off the standing-room-only ceremony at the Greenfield Public Library by encouraging the young awardees to further engage with their communities as they grow older, and continue to act as change makers and forces of good in the world.

“I’m asking you to run for office, to join an issue or political campaign, to organize your friends and classmates and co-workers, to add your needed voice to advocacy groups, to use your power and use it for good. We need leaders like you,” Comerford said.

After a Charge to Awardees, delivered by the Rev. Andrea Ayvazian, that urged the students not to stray from their missions to make the world a better place as they grow older, Turners Falls High School students Khiarieliex Huertas Hernandez and Marilyn Abarua Corona were honored for their work toward anti-bullying education and racial equity.

Huertas Hernandez, the vice president of her class, is among a group of high school students who deliver anti-bullying curriculum to middle school students. She also helped design social emotional learning and anti-racism curriculum, and took on a civics action project in which she examined nearby districts’ hiring practices and proposed steps the districts could take to recruit more educators of color.

Abarua Corona, who teaches anti-bullying curriculum to middle school students, has taken new students under her wing as a peer leader, often translating between English and Spanish. She serves as an Advisory Student Leader to bring English and Spanish-speaking students together.

“What inspired me most is my goal for the future. It has inspired me to be the very person I am today,” Huertas Hernandez said. “I have goals for the future and I want to do so much. I want to be a person that makes change in our country.”

Northfield Mount Hermon School student Willow Kwak, who worked on legislation concerning education, climate change and sustainable agriculture as a 2023 summer intern with Rep. Mindy Domb, was also honored with the Peacemaker Award. In her acceptance speech, Kwak emphasized the importance of working toward a greater good while acting as a part of a collective, rather than individualistically — a perspective she said she gained from performing in her school choir.

“Choir pushed me to be not the person in the spotlight, but to be someone that serves the needs of a whole group. I often talk about how the most important thing in choir is listening and being able to balance and blend — that’s really encouraged me to see myself as part of a whole,” Kwak said.

Greenfield High School student Quinn Mass, who at the age of 16 is the youngest person to serve on the city’s Human Rights Commission, received the award for equity and inclusion work. Working with the commission, Mass resurrected the Human Rights Award after a seven-year hiatus, and spoke at a candlelight vigil for Nex Benedict, a non-binary teen who died by suicide on Feb. 8, 2024. Mass also served on the panel at the annual GHS Youth Legislation Forum.

Additionally, the Mohawk Trail Regional School Key Club’s “Sharing and Caring Closet,” comprising Mohamed Abdelgawad, Shelby Collier, Madeline Cosentino, Riley Giard, Sophia Goodnow, Palmer King, Jackson Lilienthal, Chayim Mojallali, Gage Patenaude, Sebastian Seward, Emily Sisum, Kaylin Sumner, Phineas Tuttmann, Grace Davenport and Will VanVleet, was awarded for public service at the school and throughout the greater community.

Students from the “Twice as Smart” group — Guemon Cajuste, Anathus Bin and Jose Colon Martinez — were presented with the award for rushing to the aid of an older woman in need of medical help. The students performed a Scandinavian folk song for the crowd after Twice as Smart founder and Director Gloria Matlock recalled the story of the young students.

“She was way down and they just lifted her up and stayed with her,” Matlock said. “It was really nice how they put their best foot forward to help her.”

All awardees were presented with a citation from the state, a flower and a monetary gift. Other award recipients who could not attend the ceremony include Raven and Lex Singh, Amelia Fowler Shaw, Elizabeth Brown and Natalie Johnson of the Restorative Justice Leadership Group at Pioneer Valley Regional School; Academy at Charlemont Social Justice Council leaders Oleander Brenizer and Raia LeBreux; Mohawk Trail student Kristen Sevoian, who began a civil action project in which she collected donated furniture and other basic goods for newly arrived refugees; and Hannah Mackin, who organized and co-founded the One Love peer group at Frontier Regional School to educate young people on healthy relationships and combat domestic violence.

“When some folks say that youthful idealism is a stage we go through, don’t believe that. I know, now in my 70s, that youthful idealism is not a stage we go through. It’s a way of life,”

Ayvazian told the students. “My hope is you will not retreat from the idealism that you feel today. But you will be brave again and again, and you will do so with faith and conviction, and you will know that you are equipped and prepared and ready.”

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