

Heroes to Heroes: Event in Mt. Washington honors human services professionals, clients

TRIB LIVE HARRY FUNK | Thursday, Sept. 22, 2022 1:31 p.m.

Among the people in myriad professions who have worked toward mitigating the devastating effects of the covid-19 are “unsung heroes that, in our opinion, went unnoticed.”

“These are the men and women of human service agencies who selflessly and tirelessly, under the limitations of pandemic conditions, somehow found a way to meet the needs that they serve,” WPXI-TV reporter Lauren Talotta said while serving as emcee for an event intended to give credit where due.

Heroes to Heroes, held Sept. 11 at the LeMont Restaurant in Mt. Washington, took place through the efforts of Team Friends. The nonprofit, founded by former Fox Chapel Area School District life skills teacher Susan Cataldi, provides social and learning opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Chief among the night’s honorees were four pairs of support professionals and their clients who have formed what Team Friends calls “hero bonds,” as recommended for the distinction by the organizations with whom they’re affiliated.

Verona resident George Lampert, who works for UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Mon Yough in McKeesport, spoke at the event about his camaraderie with his clients, especially a man named David Gabriel.

“I’ve been in the field for 22 years, and I’ve noticed throughout my learning process that all the individuals in our care have rights, not to be determined by me, government or anybody else,” he said. “They’re determined by them and how they interpret what they have been shown.”

As such, he takes what he refers to as a person-centered approach.

“I have to go into their world and not try to bring them into my world,” Lampert said. “It’s fun to see them experience life and meet their goals, and it’s really cool to watch them smile when they finally understand. It’s very nice to sit there and comfort them when they’re scared.”

Another “hero bond” is between Jennifer Zaken of North Huntingdon, senior habilitation associate and job coach for Citizen Care, and Clare Gross, who is living in Bethel Park.

“It is more like sisterhood. She has my back. I have her back. And it’s just a bond that I never have experienced in my years as a DSP,” Zaken said, using the acronym for direct support professional.

“She’s my favorite client I’ve ever had, and she knows that. And I’m very blessed to have her in my life. If I’m having a bad week, she lifts me up, and I think it’s safe to say that it’s the same way for both of us.”

Also honored for their “hero bonds” were James Carson of UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Mon Yough and his client Michael Boring, and Lisa Hnath, formerly of East Suburban Citizen Academy in Murrysville, and a client, Ethan, who lives in Penn Hills.

Because of the date selected for Heroes to Heroes, Team Friends invited a pair of Pittsburgh first responders to share their thoughts about what transpired 21 years beforehand.

“Most everyone in this room remembers exactly where they were on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001,” police Sgt. Tiffany Kline-Costa said. “Hopefully, we also remember the way that communities came together to take care of each other in the days that followed. Everyone was a little bit kinder and a little bit gentler with their neighbors. Everyone worked to support each other and demonstrate community, which reminds me of this group, actually, the way that you all support each other and care for each other.”

Kline-Costa, who serves as a city community engagement officer, complimented Cataldi and her colleagues for their efforts.

“I personally feel so lucky to know Susan and to know about Team Friends,” Kline-Costa said, “and to get to be here tonight and at other events I’ve attended with Team Friends.”

Lt. Billy Jenkins, a city firefighter, provided further recollections.

“Like most people on Sept. 11, 2001, I couldn’t believe what my eyes were seeing, couldn’t be going to understand the gravity and extent that Tuesday morning would have on the next 21 years of my life. I can, however, understand why so many first responders ran into the towers or up and down the streets below,” he said about the chaos at New York City’s World Trade Center. “We run in. We run in because it’s who we are.”

Workers in the medical profession also were among those acknowledged at Heroes to Heroes, and Cataldi closed the event by mentioning others who are worthy of accolades.

“Out those doors, there are heroes among us, whether it’s a beloved parent, a family member, someone who stepped in and provided for you or someone who inspired you,” she said. “My suggestion is to call them, spend time with them, remind them how grateful you are and how you will be forever grateful for the impact that they have had on your life.”

For more information, visit www.teamfriends.org.



Jennifer Zaken (right) is joined by Clare Gross as she discusses their “hero bond”.