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Violeta Peters honored for community service

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Ken, left, and Eric Peters pose with their mother, Violeta Peters, recipient of the fifth annual Earl Thomas Teasley Humanitarian Award, on June 1. ADAM UZIALKO/STAFF

Violeta Peters stood quietly beside the podium as several speakers recited all the reasons they felt she deserved the fifth annual Earl Thomas Teasley Humanitarian Award.

Darryl Hughes, chairman of the Monmouth County Human Relations Commission (MCHRC), noted Peters' career as a nurse and administrator in health care, while commission member Rosa Lee applauded her efforts to support the Latino community.

Melissa Teasley, sister of the late MCHRC chairman for whom the award is named, compared Peters to Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc.

“You have been found to be completely and unselfishly committed to your community, with your friends and your family, and unconditionally,” Teasley told Peters at the June 1 ceremony.



Violeta Peters

“On behalf of the Miller-Teasley family, please let me just say a very hearty ‘thank you,’ and we so appreciate your willingness to carry on the work of my brother, Earl.”

Peters arrived in the U.S. from Puerto Rico at the age of 9 and began working in health care as a junior volunteer at Monmouth Medical Center when she was attending high school.

She became a registered nurse through her studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University, earned a bachelor’s degree from Georgian Court University and then returned to Fairleigh Dickinson for her master’s degree.

In 2003, Peters became CEO of Acute- Care Health System and subsequently helped to establish the Specialty Hospital of Central Jersey, Lakewood, which caters to “medically complex” patients who have often been transferred from general acute care hospitals due to financial pressures.

Peters has also been active in the realm of education, serving on local and county school boards, as well as being a delegate to the New Jersey School Boards Association. She is president of the Latino American Association of Monmouth County, which promotes access to higher education in the Latino community, and is a member of the League of United Latin American Citizens. “I am truly, truly humbled and honored to [receive] this award this afternoon,” Peters said. “I never had the privilege of meeting Rev. Teasley, but I do share his vision and his mission.

“I admire his contributions. To promote understanding and tolerance among the many cultural groups in Monmouth County ... is a tall order. It’s a very tall order.”

The Long Branch resident eschewed the conventional wisdom that social media is an integral part of mobilizing social change, opting instead for personal, one-to-one connections.

“I still feel that the best way to communicate is through caring and feeling, and that’s through personal encounters,” Peters said. “I think that if we’re going to get anywhere, it’s going to have to be through that personal touch.

“When you have an individual that you see in need ... right then and there, do what is going to make a difference.”

Linda Zucaro, vice chair of MCHRC, said Earl Teasley’s life was “a call to social justice,” adding that the award was created in his memory to honor those who pursue a more equitable and peaceful society.

“We wanted a living memory,” Zucaro said at the ceremony. “We decided we would recognize and honor Earl and what he stood for by creating an annual humanitarian of the year award.

“The award [takes] the form of a candleholder ... and this is because we believe that Earl held a light to the need for social justice. Through his example, he’s been a call to service in that cause for many, many people.”

Lee, the MCHRC member who nominated Peters for the award, credited her with an unfaltering endurance when it came to working to better the community.

“Forty-three years ago, I came to this county and I found out that Violeta was already doing a lot of things for the community,” Lee said. “I admire her persistence, because she goes from one work to another. ... And it has been all the time. She doesn’t stop.

“It’s in her to do anything she can to help the community and serve them. She serves the elderly, she serves the young. ... And in all of Monmouth County, I think she is the No. 1 person who has done through the years every single thing that she can do for the community.”

After Monmouth County freeholders Lillian Burry, Serena DiMaso and John Curley presented Peters with a plaque of recognition, former Long Branch Superintendent of Schools Joseph Ferraina — whom Peters served alongside as Board of Education president — said Peters offers a caring disposition that is too often neglected in modern society.

“Her caring is beyond, really, what words can describe,” Ferraina said. “Every day, she works with people who really need her help, and she’s always there for them.”

Peters’ sons, Eric and Ken, watched as their mother was recognized for the work they had always known her to do. Each said they were profoundly influenced by her determination and ability to balance her motherly duties, career and volunteer efforts, especially following the passing of their father.

“She’s always been a very strong woman,” Ken said. “We lost our father at a young age — my brother was only 12 and I was 18 at the time — so she had a challenge to raise us on her own, in a sense.

“She’s always been amazing to us, from being just an everyday mother to everything outside of that.”

Eric said watching his mother as he grew up imparted to him the value of hard work and a caring, positive attitude toward others.

“A lot of people said it here today. We’re just really proud,” Eric said. “[She taught us] about working hard and just every day getting up and putting in an effort to get something done, because that’s what she does and ... it’s all about being positive.”

The work of strengthening the community is an ongoing objective for Peters. She is currently working at AcuteCare Health System to create PACE, the Program for All- Inclusive Care for the Elderly, in addition to the existing 50-bed Specialty Hospital.

PACE would allow seniors to attend an assisted-living day program while still remaining in their homes, according to Peters.

“We are in the process of going for state approvals and licensing,” Peters said. “It’s going to service 55-plus Monmouth County residents ... in order to keep them away from nursing homes and keep them living within their own homes.

“It’s like a day program. People will come to the center based on their needs.”

In addition, Peters remains focused on expanding scholarship opportunities for Latin-American students. In 2015, the Latino American Association of Monmouth County awarded a dozen \$1,000 scholarships to students from towns such as Long Branch, Red Bank and Keansburg.

While building a robust community in the 21st century might seem a daunting task, Peters said it’s as simple as looking for the smallest opportunities to connect with people in one’s immediate circle.

“It’s just about trying to make those connections, one-on-one,” Peters said. “Sometimes it’s hard to try to do that ... but it’s not really planned. It’s whom you meet, through friends or through work.

“I feel like we have to get to know our own.”

As the motto engraved on the Earl Thomas Teasley Humanitarian Award proclaims, “A candle loses none of its light by lighting another candle.”

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