

City honors TRACEN food pantry founder Manfre

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

'I had a small idea. Because of all of you, it grew into a movement that surpassed any of our wildest dreams.'

—Jessica Manfre, TRACEN food pantry founder

CAPE MAY — Jessica Manfre, who founded a food bank at Training Center Cape May (TRACEN) during the partial government shutdown, was honored for her volunteer service "above and beyond expectations" by the city at a town hall meeting May 1.

Deputy Mayor Patricia Hendricks noted from December 2018 to February 2019, the impact of the partial federal government shutdown was felt at TRACEN.

"Some of us shook our heads or expressed concerns in other ways, but at least one person at TRACEN took action," she said. "She conceived a way to help the TRACEN families, so that we all could get involved and offer our help, too."

Hendricks said Manfre sought permission from TRACEN's Commanding Officer, Capt. Owen Gibbons, to organize a pantry and begin gathering and distributing food items, toiletries, baby formula, diapers, pet food and other needed items. She said Manfre promoted the pantry on social media, regional newspapers and television, which eventually gained national attention.

Manfre met with local, state and federal officials to inform them of the needs and the initiatives to remedy the situation.

"Jessica and others spent countless hours stocking and restocking the pantry

and overseeing the distribution of gift cards and cash donations," Hendricks said.

She said Manfre shared gifts to TRACEN with other Coast Guard units and federal agencies whose families were experiencing difficulties as the partial shutdown continued. Hendricks noted Manfre was named U.S. Coast Guard Spouse of the Year and is the Coast Guard nominee for Military Spouse of the Year.

Hendricks said Manfre and her family are about to move to U.S. Coast Guard Sector Mississippi River in St. Louis.

Manfre said receiving the honor was overwhelming and "almost unbelievable." "I had a small idea," she said. "Because of all of you, it grew into a movement that surpassed any of our wildest dreams."

She said in the early days of the shutdown, she simply wanted to offer comfort to Coast Guard families by filling their refrigerators and pantries. Within days, the pantry expanded into a full food bank and kept growing. "The astounding donations throughout the days continually moved us to tears," Manfre said.

Monetary donations came from throughout the state and beyond that allowed the food bank to serve Coast Guard families in multiple

states and the United Kingdom, she said.

She said other pantries started all over the country. Manfre said the sheer number of people who volunteered on the Jersey Cape Military Spouses Committee, donated to the cause or just offered encouragement was immense.

"That's what the military spouse community is all about, lifting each other," she said.

She said the arms of Cape May wrapped around the Coast Guard in a time of incredible stress and heartache.

"Because of you, we smiled every day through this hardship," Manfre said.

She quoted former President Barack Obama, "change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time, we are the ones we have been waiting for, we are the change that we see."

"I am forever changed by witnessing one of the greatest acts of human kindness in my life," Manfre said. "Thank you for trusting me to be a part of it."

The city also honored the Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club and the Chief Petty Officers Association for their vital roles and embodiment in the TRACEN pantry and their support for the training center and other military and civilian



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Deputy Mayor Patricia Hendricks, left, presents Jessica Manfre with a plaque to commemorate her volunteer work that led to the founding of a food pantry at TRACEN.

families affected by the shutdown.

Councilman Zack Mullock said the spouses club sponsors notable programs including stockings for recruits, which are handcrafted and stuffed by members of the club and distributed on Christmas Eve.

"Tears usually fill the room as the recruits enjoy a break from training to read holiday cards and special notes from family members, local schoolchildren and other donors," he said.

The stockings include gift cards, snacks and local mementos to commemorate the recruits' time spent in Cape May County, Mullock said.

He said the club also awards scholarships to dependents enrolled or ac-

cepted in accredited institutions of higher learning. Other spouses club activities include summer camp

scholarships and various other social services.

Mullock said members also act as guardian spouses to keep new or incoming spouses up to date on Coast Guard issues, resources and important events.

Jersey Cape Military Spouses Club President Tara Brooks accepted the volunteer honor.

Councilman Shaine Meier presented a plaque to the Chief Petty Officers Association-Cape May Chapter. He said the association maintains good-neighbor programs with community organizations wherever a base is located. One such organization is the Nature Center of Cape May.

Meier said the organization was supportive of the TRACEN food pantry during the shutdown. Representing the Chief Petty Officers Association-Cape May Chapter was President Yeoman Chief Petty Officer Kellie Dean.

City school tax rate won't rise for 2019-20

By JOHN ALVAREZ
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The Cape May City Elementary School Board of Education approved its 2019-20 budget, which features a slight increase in spending but the local purpose tax rate stays virtually the same as last year.

At an April 30 meeting, Business Administrator John Thomas said although the number of students attending the school had dropped over the past two years, it was projected the school's enrollment would increase for the 2019-20 school year from 153 students to 174.

"For the past five years, our projection has been up and down," Thomas said. "The number of 174 may be a bit ambitious, but if we bring in 28 preschoolers, it will be a surge."

Thomas said state aid for the school was decreasing. The school will be receiving \$55,365 less for the 2019-20 school year.

"The (state) Adjustment Aid has been going down," Thomas said. "The preschool aid, they (the state) base the amount on how many students we have enrolled on Oct. 15 every year. Last year, on Oct. 18, we had only 22 students enrolled. Now enrollment is up to 28 students. This is an unfortunate aspect of having our state funding based on just one snapshot

day because within about six weeks of that day, we enrolled six more students."

Based on calculations by the state, Cape May will lose about \$150,000 in state aid over the next five to six years.

An unforeseen provision of a new state law requires the school district to raise the tax levy by 2 percent for fiscal year 2020. Based on state calculations, Cape May's minimum tax levy should be \$2 million. As of now, Thomas said, the tax ratio for Cape May's school district is estimated at \$1.8 million. But the district does receive Federal Impact Aid, which, Thomas said, brings the tax levy over \$2 million.

Other school districts will also have their tax levy raised, but they have larger school budgets so the effect will not be as great upon them, he said. According to Thomas, the school district is working vigorously to eliminate the mandatory levy increase in the law for districts that receive Federal Impact Aid and to obtain an adjustment in 2021 to reverse the 2 percent levy increase in 2020.

Thomas said the school would not have a student from Cape May Point in the 2019-20 school year for the first time.

"They have all aged out and nobody has come to us about Pre-K," he said.

What stayed the same in the budget from last year had been school expenditures, even with an increase of one student to four students using special services during the year. New Jersey established the limit of administrative cost per student at \$2,135. Cape May elementary's budgeted administrative cost per student is \$2,126.

The budget totals \$4.5 million with an increase of about \$40,000, according to Thomas. The local purpose tax rate will be 6.4 cents per \$100 of assessed property value, a small drop from last year due to ratables increasing in Cape May.

A total of \$1.8 million will be raised by local purpose tax. The budget

uses \$600,000 in surplus. The school is also using \$600,000 from its Impact Aid Reserve.

Thomas and Superintendent Victoria Zelenak talked about some initiatives put in the school budget, including a few new programs for next year. They include a few kindergarten programs as well as language arts and science programs that involve, in some cases, teacher-made materials.

"The teachers put the resources together themselves and they were excellent," Zelenak said. "Everything is hands-on. It is amazing to see what the students are doing in the classroom."

A user-friendly budget is available at cmcboe.org.

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