



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

## Harckham Awards Liberty Medals to Five Heroic Police Officers

PETE HARCKHAM September 25, 2019

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Senator Pete Harckham awarded The New York State Senate Liberty Medal, the highest honor bestowed upon an individual by the New York State Senate, to five Senate District 40 police officers for their exceptional, heroic actions that helped save a young man's life in April.

The five police officers are **Sergeant Juan Garcia** and **Officer Erin Holly** from the Pleasantville Police Department, **Detective Rob Barber** from the Westchester County Department of Public Safety and, **Detective Walter O'Keeffe** and **Detective Lauren Valentino** from the Mount Pleasant

Police Department. They responded last spring when an emotionally disturbed 19-year-old man threatened to jump from an overpass onto the Saw Mill River Parkway near Manville Road.

“Every one of these extraordinary, committed police officers deserves our respect and admiration for their handling of the extremely dangerous situation at the Saw Mill River Parkway last April,” **said Harckham**. These officers put their own lives and personal safety at risk to save a suicidal young man and ensure that vehicles traveling on the Saw Mill were safe. Their quick actions, based on their extensive training, allowed them to de-escalate the situation and remove the young person from danger.”

In April, as soon as he responded to the call, Sergeant Garcia positioned himself on the southbound Saw Mill River Parkway to coordinate the traffic control and deployment of lifesaving equipment with the County Police. Meanwhile, Police Officer Erin Holly, Detective Rob Barber, Detective Lauren Valentino and Detective Walter O’Keefe began speaking to the young man in crisis on the bridge. Using verbal de-escalation tactics to calm him, the police officers were able to carefully move closer. After 30 minutes, they were close enough to the young man that they were able to secure him, remove him from danger and transport him to the hospital for evaluation.

**County Executive George Latimer said**, “Each day, officers in Westchester County put their lives on the line to keep us safe. This day was no different. These officers acted bravely, swiftly and effectively as the situation was escalating and they worked to save this young man’s life. Thanks to their successful efforts, utilizing the training they were given, the outcome was a positive one. Westchester thanks and commends them for their heroics.”

**Supervisor Carl Fulgenzi, Town of Mount Pleasant said**, “Along with the Mount Pleasant Town Board, I extend our appreciation to Senator Harckham for recognizing the courageous

efforts of our Mount Pleasant, Pleasantville and County Police Officers by awarding them with the New York State Senate's highest civilian honor, the Liberty Medal. I take great pride in taking the time to recognize the efforts of all our emergency services personnel whenever possible. We are equally honored to host this ceremony."

**Commissioner Thomas A. Gleason, Westchester County Police, said,** "Throughout his career, Detective Barber has used his crisis intervention skills and mental health training to assist many people who were in emotional crisis. He has helped bring numerous highly charged situations to a safe and successful conclusion for all involved. He is a tremendous asset to our Department and to the entire Westchester law enforcement community. We are very proud of him and I commend him for the professionalism, compassion and skill he brings to his work."

**Chief Paul J. Oliva, Town of Mount Pleasant Police Department, said,** "Detective Walter O'Keefe has been with the Mt. Pleasant Police Department since 1996 (23 years). He has been assigned to the Patrol Division for the majority of his career and was just recently promoted to the Detective Division in May. He has received training and is certified as a hostage negotiator. Officer O'Keefe is on the Dive/ Rescue team, and the Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Team. He is a great listener and has a talent for dealing skillfully with persons in distress. Detective Lauren Valentino has been with the Department since 2001. She was originally in the patrol division and was promoted to Detective in 2012 in the Youth Division. Lauren is a seasoned investigator and was formerly a public school teacher. She is an integral part of the Westchester-Putnam Peer Support Group that administers to first responders and offers counseling and makes referrals as needed. Lauren has taught the DARE program in the schools for many years. She administers the Police Explorer program and is an instructor at the Zone 3 Police Academy."

**Chief Erik Grutzner, Pleasantville Police Department,** “The Pleasantville Police Department is extremely proud of the way Sgt. Garcia and Officer Holly responded that morning. They showed great compassion and patience, while ensuring that the young man received the help that he needed. We are very thankful to Senator Harckham for recognizing the efforts, not only of Juan and Erin, but of the officers from Mount Pleasant and the Westchester Department of Public Safety as well, all of whom who worked so professionally together to achieve such a positive result.”

New York State Senate District 40 includes parts of Northern Westchester (Briarcliff Manor, Buchanan, Cortlandt, Croton-on-Hudson, Lewisboro, Mount Kisco, Mount Pleasant, New Castle, North Salem, Peekskill, Pleasantville, Pound Ridge, Sleepy Hollow, Somers, Yorktown) Putnam (Brewster, Carmel, Patterson, Southeast) and Dutchess (Beekman, Pawling).