



Volunteer Center of Burlington County is proud to announce the recipients of the 16th Annual Lloyd Ritter Community Service Award:

*Robert & Ellen Healey
Gleneayre Farm
Lumberton, New Jersey*

On the surface it all seems so simple. You take a passion for horses, combine it with a desire to help kids, and create an equestrian program that teaches responsibility, growth, and self-discovery. This is what you'll find when you venture up the tree-lined driveway of the Healey's Gleneayre Farm in Lumberton.

But, oh, if it were just that simple.

The Healeys, Robert T. Sr. and Ellen, have a far more expansive, far more complex, and without dispute, incredibly successful record of community service. What they do at home, on the farm is one thing. Quite another is their dedication and philanthropic work for the poverty- and disease-stricken citizens of third world countries.

For the Volunteer Center of Burlington County, honoring the Healey's is an easy call. The bigger challenge is figuring out exactly where to begin to tell their remarkable story. We'll do our best. They will be the 16th recipients of our Lloyd Ritter Community Service Award. It is the second time we will pay tribute to a couple. We couldn't be more proud.

The international Ebola epidemic was largely in the background when the Volunteer Center first engaged the Healeys. But in what some may call the irony of ironies, one of their ventures, the Healey International Relief Foundation, has been aiding in relief activities in the war-torn - and Ebola-stricken - African nation of Sierra Leone since 2005.

Sierra Leone was given the dubious title of "Worst Country in the World" every year from 2001 to 2011 by the United Nations. A brutal 11-year civil war that ended in 2002 has left this country with the highest infant mortality rate in the world, and a lack of clean water that has caused a resurgence in water-borne diseases. Poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment abounds.

The HIRF was instrumental in helping to rebuild and equip one of the country's major hospitals, which had been heavily damaged and looted by rebels during the war. The fund, in cooperation

with other organizations, provided an extensive list of assistance, including medical equipment, orphanage support and educational materials -- this, in a place where many children were left maimed, disabled and homeless because of war.

Against that backdrop, we return one sunny, autumn afternoon, to the stables at Gleneayre Farm. A young girl, perhaps 12, is wiping down the metal bars on one of the stable doors, the first of her assignments for the day. Not far away, two other young ladies are brushing down a calm and seemingly appreciative horse, which towers over them. Walk out to the open pasture and, in an enclosed field, young riders are taking equestrian lessons, learning how to guide their mounts over low-rising fences.

This is the Gleneayre Equestrian Program at work. Founded in 1998, the program can be broken down into categories. But at the heart of it all, it is targeted to children facing academic, social, financial and other challenges. The program teaches ethics and character skills, work habits, and of course, horsemanship. There is also the opportunity to participate in horse shows and competitions.

Not many of the families served could possibly afford the cost of running this program. But, as Ellen Healey puts it, everyone pays according to their ability; everyone "pays something," on the knowledge that folks have more commitment why they have "buy-in." The remaining cost is borne by the Healeys' fundraising activities. They are very good fundraisers.

Ellen is passionately dedicated to the equestrian program and welcomes the opportunity to chat with visitors about it. From the program's inception, there has been a partnership with the Burlington County 4-H Horse Project. The Healeys have not only "lent" the use of their property, Ellen has volunteered her time. We're talking a 17-year commitment, and counting, on her part.

Gleneayre Farm is actually divided by a deep ravine, through which the southern branch of the Rancocas Creek flows. On the northern side of the creek there are more stables, but also a multi-purpose building adjoined by a paddock. Here, the program is targeted to "at risk" youth, some of whom have already been labeled juvenile offenders.

Some of the young people brought here are in the company of Sheriff's Officers. The schooling is both classroom and horses. The teaching objectives are much the same: responsibility, respect, self-esteem. The curriculum is fashioned around a cowboy tradition. Why? Because cowboys were among America's most challenged survivalists, fending for themselves while spending days leading herds of cattle across open plains. It's different; it works.

The Healeys have found the ideal trainer and teacher for their programs, in the person of Alison Newman. It is no surprise to learn that she has degrees in both Psychology and Equine Sciences.

Again, summarizing all of the Healeys' ventures in community service and philanthropy, both at home and abroad, is no small task. It may have all taken off in 1988 when Bob Healey founded Living Bridges International, which facilitated the adoption of poor Mexican children by

American families, and also helped feed and educate the poor. Living Bridges eventually became Gleneayre Equestrian Program.

Then there was the establishment of the Children's Resource Center, which owns and operates Ironwood Swim Club, a non-profit, 85-acre community swim center in Lumberton with rope courses across the Rancocas.

In 1998, the International Education Foundation was established, which supported children from low- and middle-income families who did not qualify for the financial aid they needed to attend Catholic schools and private and public universities. That gave rise to the Healey Education Foundation, which invests in the sustainability and growth of Catholic schools. Or to put it another way, the Healey's also remain true to the religion which has guided them and instilled their values.

The Healeys would consider it remiss if we did not mention their son, Robert T. Healey, Jr., who is also vested in the successful Viking Yacht Company co-founded by his father. This Healey is likewise deeply involved and committed in the philanthropic undertakings of his parents.

Robert Jr. will be in the house as we pay tribute to the Healeys. They also have the support and devotion of their other grown children, but because of the traveling distances involved, some of them may be unable to attend the dinner in their parents' honor. This includes Lizanne Healey-Smith, Christine Healey, Caroline Addilon, Toland Sherriff, Dr. Alexis Iaccarino, and Leigh Healey.

In accepting the Volunteer Center's honor, Bob and Ellen join a distinguished list of past honorees, including Dr. Robert Messina, President of Burlington County College; Mary Wells, Director of Family Services of Burlington County; Millie Gama, Executive Director of the Burlington County Chamber of Commerce; Burlington County Freeholder Vincent R. Farias; former Burlington County Superintendent of Schools Walter Keiss; Dick and Doris Alaimo of Mount Holly; Robert V. Santare, President of Champion Fasteners; former Burlington County Clerk Edward A. Kelly, Jr.; Joseph Laufer, former Associate Dean at Burlington County College; Burlington County Consumer Affairs Director Renee Borstad; Funeral Director Wilson Bradley of Marlton; Architect and Mount Holly activist Regan Young; Burlington County Sheriff Jean Stanfield; and, most recently, former Freeholder and pastor, Reverend Aubrey Fenton with Abundant Life Ministries.

Now in its 19th year, the Volunteer Center serves as a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities by connecting volunteers of all ages with community organizations and projects that need their services.

The Center maintains a website at www.volunteercenterburlingtoncounty.org.