



NEWS FROM THE OFFICE OF
ADAM J. BELLO
MONROE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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COUNTY EXECUTIVE ADAM BELLO AND COUNTY LEGISLATORS HONOR 2026 YOUTH AWARD RECIPIENTS

ROCHESTER, NY — Monroe County Executive Adam Bello and members of the County Legislature honored the recipients of the 2026 Young Citizen of the Year, Gary Mervis Youth Team Achievement, and Willie W. Lightfoot Youth Advocate of the Year awards at a ceremony held last night at Monroe Community College.

“The annual Monroe County Legislative Youth Awards are a great way to honor our local youth for their outstanding accomplishments,” **said County Executive Bello**. “I am proud to join my partners in government as we recognize the youth who have stepped up in meaningful ways to better their community and the adults that advocate for them.”

For more than 30 years, the Monroe County Legislature has worked in partnership with the Rochester-Monroe County Youth Bureau to identify and honor exceptional youth and youth advocates for their contributions to our community.

The Lightfoot Award is named for the late Willie Walker Lightfoot, who served in the County Legislature between 1978 and 2001. He also served as president of Action for a Better Community and was a founding member of the SouthWest Area Neighborhood Association. Lightfoot was known for his passion for justice and fairness, particularly for those denied opportunity by racism and structural inequality.

The Gary Mervis Youth Team Achievement Award is named in honor of Gary Mervis, an exceptional member of the Rochester community. Mervis founded Camp Good Days and Special Times, Inc. to support children suffering from cancer and other life challenges. Over time, his community work expanded to include anti-violence efforts, coordinating outreach events known as TIPS in the City of Rochester and Project EXILE, a multi-agency response to the illegal gun industry.

This year, 79 youths, 13 adults, and three teams were nominated and one award was presented in each category.

The 2026 awardees are:

- **Adriana Cassano** - The Young Citizen of the Year Award. Adriana is the founder and leader of Iroquois Middle School’s Best Buddies Chapter, advocating for opportunities and support for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through

Best Buddies, Adriana has helped students both with and without disabilities build connections and friendships.

- Salvatore Gerbino - The Willie W. Lightfoot Youth Advocate of the Year Award. The organizer of Rochester's first Polar Plunge to help fundraise and support New York State's Special Olympics, Sal has touched the lives of countless athletes and their families. Over 25 years, Salvatore has expanded Polar Plunge drawing in thousands of plungers, volunteers, and first responders each year, and raising more than \$5 million for the Special Olympics.
- Seneca Park Zoo Urban Ecology Program Team - The Gary Mervis Team Award. Members of the Urban Ecology Team serve as environmental ambassadors and role models by promoting sustainability and conservation in the community. The team demonstrates strong leadership, communication, and scientific skills in their work to strengthen Western New York's environment.

These awards were established by the County Legislature as one of the highest honors for youth and adult leadership, community service, advocacy and perseverance.

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