

***43rd Annual  
New Jersey  
Women of Achievement  
Awards***

***May 6, 2024***

Sponsored by

New Jersey State Federation of  
Women's Clubs of GFWC



and



Douglass Residential College  
of Rutgers,  
The State University of New Jersey

## ***The New Jersey Women of Achievement Award***

The Women of Achievement Award was initiated in 1981 and is co-sponsored by New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs of GFWC and Douglass College. The Federation and Douglass College have been partners in encouraging women to achieve since 1918, with the opening of the College, the first public institution of higher learning in the State to admit women. First known as the New Jersey College for Women, the college was renamed in 1955 in honor of Mabel Smith Douglass, the dynamic College Chairman of the Federation who became the College's first Dean. Since those days, the largest women's volunteer organization in the State and the only women's residential college in the nation that is part of a public research university have maintained close ties, and are proud to honor New Jersey's Women of Achievement.

**2024**  
***Women of Achievement***

***Geeta Chopra***

**Television Host:  
Central New Jersey Network**

***Catherine Kerris***

**President of EPOCH**

***Debra Lynch***

**Retired Psychologist**

***Deborah Visconi***

**President & CEO,  
Bergen New Bridge Medical Center**

***Donna Ward***

**Vice President of Sales,  
Hard Rock Hotel and Casino**

# ***Geeta Chopra***

## **Television Host, Central New Jersey Network**

Geeta Chopra is a faith-filled individual who seeks to make her communities a better place. She has won the New Jersey Governor's award twice in two different categories. She also sits on various boards and hosts two television shows in Princeton, NJ. She volunteers her time to make New Jersey a better place by mentoring people, producing amazing programs on her show that inspire thousands, and serving in the community as a volunteer. She recently launched a book on health and wellness which has earned #1 New Release status on Amazon and thirteen 5-star reviews in 2023!

Geeta owned and operated the Johnny Rockets Inc. franchise at Quakerbridge Mall in 2018 before the pandemic. She employed 35 individuals and designed the training program herself. She not only created jobs for American citizens, but held fundraisers, raffles, and developed strong community relations. As a pioneer, Geeta creates things, entities, businesses, and launches ideas. She inspires many on her journey, as she battled severe health problems and came out stronger. Perhaps this is her most defining characteristic. As told in her book, TV episodes, and mentoring sessions, she believes in overcoming, not surviving.

She is a builder of men and women as a strong believer that we can all achieve our God-given potential through our talents, skills, and consistency. She was featured in the Princeton Packet twice, ROI NJ, New Jersey 101.5, and a few more publications. People look to her for advice on tough matters such as personal breakthrough, recovering from trauma, and permanently healing from disease. She has helped hundreds domestically and internationally find their faith and restore their lives through their higher power.

Geeta is unstoppable, and if you have a conversation with her, you will quickly learn that she is just getting started! She has plans to be in public office and own more businesses, thereby creating more jobs in the New Jersey economy.

Geeta Chopra was nominated by Patricia Kline.

# *Catherine Kerris*

## **President of EPOCH**

Catherine Kerris is a retired Social Worker who helped to develop an educational program for handicapped children. As a college senior, Catherine Kerris dealt directly with Eleanor Roosevelt to plan a UN visit by a cadre of students. Post graduation, she influenced Cedar Crest College to develop a Social Work curriculum which has been in place since the 1970s. As a Social Worker, she received an award from the Madison Eagle Christmas Fund, a community volunteer group for seniors and needy families.

Before graduation, Catherine passed the NJ State Civil Service Exam, was employed by the Division of Youth and Family Services, and worked as a Medical Social Worker at the Hospital Center at Orange. During her five years there, she married, gave birth prematurely to twin girls; however, when her daughters were two years old, her marriage sadly ended, and she became the School Social Worker for the Madison Public Schools. There, Catherine helped to develop EPOCH (Educational Program of Children Handicapped), which fulfilled the need for an after-school recreational program. In 1973, she joined the Board of Trustees, becoming Vice-President, then President. Simultaneously, she took a part-time, on-call job in East Hanover as Municipal Welfare Director, which she held for 28 years, retiring in 2002. At retirement, she moved to another part of the state, but has continued in the role of EPOCH President, making her total involvement 51 years to present.

In combination with self-assessment and feedback from others, Catherine is described as dedicated, personable, other-centered, adept at problem-solving, analytical, tenacious, creative, organized, and able to multi-task. She has been told by mental health professionals with whom she has worked that she has a natural inclination to see the strengths in others before noting the weaknesses, and to enable the use of those strengths for clients' self-help and personal growth.

Catherine Kerris was nominated by Kathleen Bagley, President of the Woman's Club of Spring Lake.

# ***Debra Lynch, Ph.D.***

## **Retired Psychologist**

Dr. Debra Lynch is a retired psychologist who currently serves as a member of the Rutgers University Board of Trustees. Dr. Lynch spent her career working with adults with developmental disabilities. During that time, she developed a specialty in developmental disabilities and geriatrics with a subspecialty in Down Syndrome and Alzheimer's disease. She has presented on these topics at numerous conferences and agencies.

After 29 years in state service as Director of Psychology at a number of developmental centers, Dr. Lynch retired in 2013. During her career, she served as Staff Clinical Psychologist at Woodbridge Developmental Center, Director of Psychology at Green Brook Regional Center, and Director of Psychology at Hunterdon Developmental Center.

Debbie has served on numerous boards. She served from 2012 to 2018 on the Volunteer Guardianship One on One Board and was on their executive committee as Secretary.

She has been on the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College Board since 2009, serving as Vice President of Alumnae Relations and as a member and chair of numerous other committees. In 2017, Debbie received the Margaret T. Corwin Award for her dedication and service to the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College.

Since 2011, Debbie has been a member of the Rutgers Board of Trustees. She has served for 2 terms on the Executive Committee and is currently chairing the Nominating Committee.

In 2020, Debbie was named to The Loyal Sons & Daughters of Rutgers. This organization recognizes individuals who have made meaningful and long-standing contributions to the betterment of Rutgers by performing extraordinary volunteer service or by making a significant impact on university life and culture.

Debbie earned a Bachelor's degree from Douglass College in 1979, a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1982, and a doctorate in Counseling Psychology from Seton Hall University in 1999.

Dr. Lynch was nominated by Valerie Anderson, 2018 WOA Award recipient.

# *Deborah Visconi*

## **President & CEO, Bergen New Bridge Medical Center**

Deborah Visconi is a highly accomplished executive with more than 30 years of success in providing strategic direction, vision, leadership, and oversight of operations in hospitals and healthcare systems across the metropolitan region.

A visionary thinker with a strong passion for patient experience, Deb leads with a focus on compassion, consistency, and quality. Her entrepreneurial style allows her to navigate highly complex environments challenged by limited resources, intensively competitive and diverse markets, and heavy regulation, which has established her as an industry thought leader.

Due to her remarkable career, she was selected as the champion leader tasked with transitioning New Jersey's largest hospital from its former for-profit management model to a new, non-profit community asset now known as Bergen New Bridge Medical Center.

Since she arrived in 2017, Deb has transformed a community safety-net hospital into a destination hospital. By diversifying the payor mix and establishing first-time contracts with managed care companies, she achieved equitable access to comprehensive healthcare for thousands in Bergen County, regardless of insurance. Visconi was tasked with raising a community hospital from the ashes, and she created an effective, highly regarded healthcare facility staffed by dedicated, engaged professionals who speak with pride of the workplace and of her leadership.

As a Latina hospital leader, Deb understands the unique issues and needs of underserved and minority communities, which she has prioritized in the hospital's community health needs assessment process and its ongoing outreach efforts. This led to the Hospital's development of the first LGBTQ+ Wellness Center in Northern New Jersey. In 2018, Bergen New Bridge became a Veterans Community Care Provider to increase access to care for the nearly 25,000 Bergen County veterans.

Deb embodies what it means to be an icon in her industry – starting her career as a phlebotomist and becoming the President and CEO for the largest hospital in New Jersey, eliminating barriers to quality healthcare, and providing care the community needs, when and where they need it.

Deborah Visconi was nominated by Julia Orlando, 2023 WOA Award recipient.

# ***Donna Ward***

## **Vice President of Sales, Hard Rock Hotel and Casino**

Donna Ward is an accomplished senior executive with 38 years of proven success in sales, marketing, and operations. Donna is currently serving as VP of Sales at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City.

From 2021 to the present, Donna has led the sales team to exceed budget goals by 178% and is personally responsible for \$2,000,000 in business at the Hard Rock. She was appointed as co-chair for Hard Rock's Women in Leadership Program.

In 2023, Donna successfully attracted the National Council of Governors to hold their annual Governors' Conference at the hotel. The logistics of organizing 50 State Governors, their families, and staff, arranging lodging, meals, free time, and conference space, and even more importantly, overseeing the security and safety of the attendees was a monumental accomplishment. First Lady Jill Biden was also in attendance at this Conference.

Prior to the Hard Rock, Donna served as VP of Sales, Catering, and Convention Services at the Golden Nugget. While there, Donna broke the proverbial glass ceiling by being promoted to Vice President, the first woman to achieve this prestigious milestone in a field that is almost exclusively male. Donna was awarded Landry Corporation's Pinnacle Award for Leadership in 2012.

Donna has been a volunteer for the Miss America Foundation for 36 years, starting as a basic volunteer and ultimately becoming Chairman of the Board from 2020 to 2022. As Chairman, Donna oversaw the administering of scholarship funds that were awarded by state & local licensees of the Miss America Organization in over 800 state and local competitions throughout the United States for both the Miss America Organization competitions and the Miss America Outstanding Teen competitions nationwide.

Donna is a staunch supporter of MudGirls Studios, a nonprofit organization that empowers disadvantaged women through training and employment. MudGirls Studios helps women transition onto a pathway towards self-sufficiency and out of poverty.

Donna received a BS in Hotel and Restaurant Management from East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania.

Donna was nominated by Linda Babeuf, Vivien Finn, and Shirley Holly.