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By Robert Lebowitz  
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Photo By Robert Kalfus

Prominent local leaders, Jewish clergy, and city officials convened this past Sunday for a breakfast honoring four Riverdalians who have made outstanding contributions to the Jewish community both here and at large.

The Riverdale Jewish Community

Council (RJCC) honored former City Councilwoman June Eisland, scholar and author Thomas Cahill, Yeshiva University president Richard Joel, and Project HOPE, a social service program, at its 20th Annual Legislative and Awards Breakfast at the Riverdale YM/YWHA. The 25-year-old RJCC is the umbrella organization for Riverdale's Jewish organizations and communal services.

Also attending the event were Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion, Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz, State Supreme Court Justice Mark Friedlander, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, Councilman G. Oliver Koppell, City Council Speaker Gifford Miller, City Council Majority Leader Joel Rivera, State Senator Eric Schneiderman, and Comptroller Bill Thompson.

Officiating at the event was Ari Hoffnung, the newly-elected president of the RJCC. Hoffnung took over the position in January from Mark Friedlander, who was recently elected to the State Supreme Court.

Hoffnung opened the breakfast by announcing the launching of the RJCC's new state-of-the-art Web site, [www.shalomriverdale.org](http://www.shalomriverdale.org), which features an interactive community calendar as well as updated news from the Associated Press (AP) and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA). One particularly innovative feature on the Web site, Hoffnung noted, is that Passover-observant Jews to sell their chametz, or unleavened bread products, on-line. The holiday, which commences next month, is celebrated with a ritual cleansing of all such products from one's home.

Hoffnung credited Assemblyman Dinowitz with raising \$5,000 to help launch the Web site as well as contributing greatly to other causes such as providing health care services for familial dysautonomia.

"If I am remembered for nothing else, at least I will have helped people sell their chametz on-line," quipped Dinowitz as he presented an enlarged check for \$5,000 to the RJCC.

Councilman Koppell then introduced June Eisland, this year's recipient of the Michael Schreck Community Builder Award. Michael Schreck was the executive director of the SAR Academy who passed away suddenly last year.

Koppell praised Eisland's record of community service, which included such accomplishments as helping to create the Metrocard. For her part, Eisland credited the community for all her achievements.

"You gave me the opportunity to serve," Eisland said to the audience. "I never would have gone into public service without being asked to by the community."

Mayor Bloomberg followed Eisland's remarks with praise for the religious commitments of New Yorkers.

"Religion is a very important part of New York City," he said. "In many senses, September 11 was an attack upon our rights and is part of the same terrorist war we are waging now. People say it's dangerous to stand up against discrimination; but it's dangerous everywhere. We all have to stand up."

The Mayor moved on to other outstanding issues in the City, focusing upon educational reform. He stressed the danger of social promotion, explaining that "our society is a competitive one," and that worrying solely about our "children's feelings or self-esteem" at the expense of the rigors of real work will be detrimental to their future success as adults. "Having people dependent upon society for their livelihoods is not beneficial to anyone," he said.

Eliot Engel followed Mayor Bloomberg with his presentation of the Martin Rollins Interfaith Brotherhood Award to Thomas Cahill, author of "The Gifts of the Jews", which "relates a world that was irrevocably changed by ancient Jewish culture." Cahill, a native of the Bronx, spent two years studying Hebrew at the Jewish Theological Seminary under Riverdalian Zahava Flatow to read the Hebrew Bible.

"One of my hopes is to put different communities within the Western Tradition back in dialogue with each other," Cahill said. "I would like Christian communities to say, 'Now I understand what this is about, when I didn't before.'" "Shalom," he concluded, addressing those in attendance. "You are the fathers and mothers of the Western World. Todah min HaLev; thanks from the heart."

Final honoree Richard Joel shared the Andrew Zucker Jewish Community Service Award with Project Hope, a project of B'nai B'rith and the Bronx Jewish Community Council that provides care packages to seniors and shut-ins before Chanukah and Passover. The award was named after Riverdalian Andrew Zucker, an attorney and active member of the Jewish community who died in the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Joel is the newly installed President of Yeshiva University. Prior to assuming this post, Joel spent fourteen years as the International Director of Hillel, the Jewish organization with branches on college campuses throughout the world. He began his address by recalling his Riverdale roots.

"I was born at 6040 Huxley Avenue on 261st Street," he said, "and from the beginning, I understood what community is, and that when it works, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

In a story particularly inspiring in light of the recent Catholic-Jewish debates over Mel Gibson's controversial movie, "The Passion of the Christ", Joel related a recent incident illustrating the common base of the two great faiths and the possibility of forging community between them.

"A few weeks ago, 12 cardinals visited Yeshiva University. When asked for the purpose of their visit, they replied, 'We wanted to see the roots: how deep they are and how deep they grow.'"

"The Jews gave us the outside and the inside," Joel concluded. "Most of our best words are from the Jews: Faith, hope, love. But we are partners in the creation of these values, not passive recipients; we must all work hard in our own lives to make them real."

Judging from the heartfelt reception these honorees received, it was clear that these four Riverdalians had done their part.

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