

# Honor 6 Civil Servants Who Make Government Responsive to Citizens

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, June 8, 2015 5:30 pm

If Charles A. Gili Sr.'s neighbors in Brooklyn sometimes ask him about tree-pruning methods or complain about a closed bathroom or a broken sprinkler in the parks, he doesn't mind.

"My job is to make sure those things work, so if they're coming to me, they're coming to the right place," the 33-year veteran of the Department of Parks and Recreation said last week.

## Park Ranger Who Rose

Mr. Gili, the Chief of Operations for the department's Brooklyn office, began as a seasonal Park Ranger in 1982 and rose through the ranks to now manage 500 staffers who oversee all of the borough's parks that include 240 playgrounds, a dozen swimming pools and 600,000 trees.

He was one of six civil servants honored June 2 during the 2015 Sloan Public Service Awards, sponsored by the Fund for the City of New York and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which celebrate the public employees who embody the best qualities in the city's workforce. Each of the winners received a \$10,000 check and heard testimonials from the commissioners or heads of their departments.

"I used the parks growing up as a kid, and as a father later on, and so I kind of try to approach my job looking at: Is my mom going to enjoy a visit to this park? Are my kids going to be safe to play here in this park?" Mr. Gili said.

## Runs Charity for Vets

He listed Prospect Park, close to where he grew up, and Marine Park, near his current home, as two of his favorites. But he also spends time as a women's ice hockey coach (his daughter is a college-level player) and operating a charity to support families of veterans. He's been eligible to retire for three years, but he said the daily challenges have left him working.

"It never gets boring, it's never become boring for me, and I think if it was, I would have left," he



## Laureates of Public Service

LAUREATES OF PUBLIC SERVICE: Six city workers prepare to receive their 2015 Sloan Public Service Awards and \$10,000 each for excelling at their fields within city government. From left to right they are Marsha Kellam, Caroline H. Bragdon, Stephen J. O'Brien, Charles A. Gili Sr., Michael Johnson and Roxana F. Benavides.

said.

Marsha Kellam, the Queens Borough Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services's child-protection division, compared the honor to getting an Academy Award. Her 30 years of service included harrowing but gratifying encounters. Two years after she began as a Caseworker, an eight-year-old boy described seeing his mom overdose on heroin. She survived, but Ms. Kellam was able to reunite the child with estranged family in Ohio.

### **'Their Joy Stuck With Me'**

"Just to see the joy on their faces was actually something that stuck with me," she said.

She initially joined ACS for the salary boost over her previous job, but now oversees 650 to 700 employees at three different locations. "I have to say: tough job, but I enjoy coming into work every day and I really, truly do mean that," she said.

Other awardees included Brooklyn Public Library Neighborhood Library Supervisor Roxana F. Benavides, who was feted for engaging communities at the Sunset Park branch. She manages employment-assistance, adult-education and English-language programs, and has created a mobile library for families to access materials.

Michael Johnson, an Assistant Maintenance Supervisor at the Housing Authority's James Weldon Houses in East Harlem, began as a Caretaker 27 years ago and has worked in several developments "eight days a week." He has cleared snow at 4 a.m. and moved compost for a community garden on his day off.

Some were recognized for literally thinking out of the box. Stephen J. O'Brien, the Director of Food and Menu Services for the Department of Education, helped the city schools introduce a round, compostable lunch tray last month. He said the improvement was "less institutional, much more approachable and the food looks great on it."

### **Parents Steered Him**

He graduated from culinary school in 1991 thinking he would be working in hotels, but his parents—both former educators—encouraged him to respond to a newspaper ad for the city school system. Mr. O'Brien went from managing a handful of cafeterias to providing 940,000 meals every day. He also expanded the use of salad bars from high-school lunch rooms to those in 1,000 k-12 schools.

He said it was good to share the spotlight with the nutrition program and the 8,000 school-lunch workers.

Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña, who received a Sloan Award in 1989, said he, like others in New York who develop innovative solutions, would set the tone for sustainability and costs across other cities. "Good public servants don't accept the rules as written," she said. "They try to figure out,

‘What’s the problem?’ and, ‘How do you solve it?’”

Caroline H. Bragdon, the Director of Neighborhood Interventions at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, developed some inventive approaches to killing rats. She has met with communities to eliminate conditions that attract vermin and worked on a team that began the first citywide “rat indexing” program to count their colonies. Her first day on the job was 9/11 and she worked on air-monitoring at the World Trade Center site and tested protective equipment worn by responders.

The 14-year veteran was awarded by DOHMH Commissioner, Dr. Mary Bassett, who was lauded last fall for the city’s response to the Ebola scare. She said health threats brought civil servants and New Yorkers together and Ms. Bragdon agreed.

“We really show that we could become united against a common enemy,” she said. “I feel that we’re a better team because of rats.”