

ROBERT H. AX AWARDS

Peers pick educators for distinction

BY RICHARD DE SANTA
Staff Writer

Glen Rock High School (GRHS) teacher and guidance counselor Ellen Barrett and Middle School (GRMS) teacher Tracy Widowski are the winners of the 42nd annual Robert H. Ax awards, announced Monday at a reception packed by peers and other district associates and family members in the Dario Valcarcel Media Center.

Voted the distinction by colleagues at the May faculty meetings, the duo joins 62 predecessors cited since the Home and School Association (HSA) established the award in 1969, to honor founding GRHS Principal Robert H. Ax upon his retirement.

Ellen Barrett (GRHS)

Hired originally as a Latin and English teacher, Barrett has "never forgotten that she is a teacher first and foremost," said Angela Vila, Middle and High School HSA president, who officiated and presented the awards.

She became a full-time guidance counselor in the late 1980s, and has since "diligently overseen" SAT and AP testing programs, devoting countless Saturdays and after-school hours in the process. As guidance counselor, "she has been an untiring student advocate, encouraging students to seek academic challenges, and she has also ensured that literally thousands of Glen Rock students have gained admission to colleges and universities all over the country," Vila said.

Noting that Barrett was a colleague of Robert Ax, Vila said she "exemplifies the qualities Mr. Ax valued - love of people in general and young people in particular; exceptionally high degree of personal integrity, and loyalty to colleagues, the community and most of all, to students ... colleagues describe her as

extraordinarily conscientious, unfailingly dependable and absolutely dedicated to her profession."

A long-time member of the Glen Rock Education Association (GREA) Executive Board, Barrett has chaired the membership committee and has been responsible for welcoming new teachers and honoring members as they reach various milestones in their service.

"This year's award recipient demonstrates the highest degree of professionalism at all times, and in this regard, she serves as a powerful role model for all of her colleagues," Vila said.

"Thank you so much; I'm shaking, I don't know what to say," exclaimed Barrett after a prolonged round of

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applause from her colleagues. After introducing family members present, she said, "I'm stunned, I'm grateful and I'm honored. It has been a wonderful, wonderful experience for many, many years as so many of you know, with great memories of all of you. It couldn't have been possible without each and every one of you - and your companionship, your help and your dedication. Thank you all so much."

Tracy Widowski (GRMS)

After graduating from Manhattan College and beginning her teaching career in Wyckoff, Widowski came to the district seven years ago, and has served for several years as GRMS student council advisor. She is also GRMS cross country coach, and assistant track coach at the high school.

Since joining the Glen Rock system, she has "taken on numerous activities for the benefit of the students and the community as a whole," said Vila. "She has given countless hours to ensure that her

students, student council members and athletes all receive the attention, support and leadership to succeed and grow in all aspects of their lives.

"She has a passion and drive that is contagious and she brings that to all aspects of her life," said Vila, noting that Widowski enjoys outdoor activities year-round, including gardening, kayaking, riding ATVs, fishing and spending time with her family. "She loves traveling with her husband, with whom she shares a household with her adorable and spoiled yellow Labrador, Molly," she said.

Born and raised in Ramsey, Widowski retains strong ties there, having competed under high school cross country coach John Kirchhoff and the late athletic director Lou Molino, both of whom continued to mentor her long after they were her coaches and teachers, Vila said.

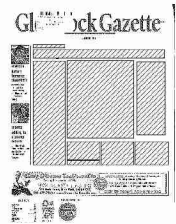
Vila concluded, "We look forward to her contributions to the students, the school and the Glen Rock community for many years to come."

Following similarly lengthy and enthusiastic ovation, Widowski said, "I too have absolutely no idea what to say."

Alongside her husband, parents and grandparents, she said, "None of this would have been possible without you guys. Everything I do, I do with the support of people here at school." With a nod to both her colleagues and family members, Widowski said, "There's a group of people that always has my back at school, and I really appreciate that. And this (family) is the group that has my back when I come home and I'm crazy after a day at school.

"I'm so honored, and I'm just speechless - and that's it!" she said to appreciative laughter.

As founding principal, Robert H. Ax traveled around the nation in the mid-1950s, interviewing



hundreds of prospective teachers for the then-new Glen Rock High School, hiring a select few. Having retired in 1969 after 14 years of service to the district, Ax died in 1993 at age 84.

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Career highlights

Ellen Barrett

- Former Latin and English teacher.
- Full-time guidance counselor since the late 1980s.
- Oversees SAT and AP testing programs.
- Long-time member of Glen Rock Education Association Executive Board.

Tracy Widowski

- Graduated from Manhattan College.
- Began teaching in Wyckoff.
- Came to Glen Rock school district seven years ago.
- GRMS student council advisor.
- GRMS cross country coach, and assistant track coach at the high school.



MARION BROWN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tracy Widowski (left), a Glen Rock Middle School teacher, and Ellen Barrett, a guidance counselor at Glen Rock High School, are this year's recipients of the Robert H. Ax awards.



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Ellen Barrett (left) and Tracy Widowski display their 2011 Robert H. Ax award certificates.