Dempsey presented with Making a Difference Award

Emily Dempsey was honored for her role in creating the Center for Community Arts in Cape May.

The award presentation by Dempsey was made to the Center for Community Arts (CCA), which was one of 12 honorees at the Berrie Making a Difference Awards on May 6 at Ramapo College.

Since 1997, the Russ Berrie Making a Difference Award has honored New Jersey residents whose outstanding acts of service and Bamboozle have made a difference on the lives of others.

The award presentation noted Dempsey as a six-generation resident of West Cape May who co-founded the Center for Community Arts, supported the creation of the Harriet Tubman Museum and preserved African American history in Cape May.

Dempsey said an incident took place on Cape May Beach in 1971 when a group of young people playing music loudly on their boom boxes was arrested. She said she wanted to turn the situation around.

"We're about eight of us," Dempsey said. "Because of all the chaos, we thought we're going on, we sat around the table trying to think how we could make it better for those kids."

That meeting marked the formation of the CCA, which introduced young people to the arts and included field trips to theaters in New York City and Philadelphia.

The CCA has a long-standing African American History Committee through which Dempsey worked to incorporate more than 80 oral histories.

"We're getting ready to open the Franklin Street School that was built for African American students in 1927 and that building is going to become a library and archives for a lot of what we've all collected," she said.

Dempsey will receive $7,500 from the foundation.

Ramapo College President Cindy Jobb said the college has worked with the Russ Berrie Foundation to present the Making a Difference Awards to unsung heroes who make New Jersey a better place.

"Each one has truly made a difference on the individuals and communities across our state," she said.

Since 1997, 4,000 people have been nominated for the award with 330 individuals being awarded, according to the Russ Berrie Educational Corp., who hosted the presentation. He said since 1997, 408 individuals have been honored from every corner of the state with $19 million awarded in the past 26 years.

"The people you meet here, our honorees, they don't seek attention, they don't want the spotlight, but they deserve it," Adams said.