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Retired Harwich teacher Chilaka community advocate 'rock star'

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HARWICH — Angelina Raneo Chilaka likes getting involved and helping others in her community, especially with educational and health issues because she is a retired health teacher.

"I grew up that way," she said. "My family's rule was you help other people."

And help she has — as a teacher, a Red Cross instructor, a member of the Harwich Council on Aging, a board member of Outer Cape Health Services,

a member of the Martin Luther King Jr. Action Team, and as the producer of the Cape Verdean Heritage Oral History Project.

Larry Ballantine, president of Outer Cape Health Services board of directors, said Chilaka's involvement in the schools and many community activities, and particularly her connection to the Cape Verdean community, were reasons she was asked to be on the board two years ago.

"She knows everybody in town," he said, adding that when he took her on a

tour of the Outer Cape facilities, "I felt I was in the presence of a rock star," because everyone wanted to stop and talk to her."

Those are some of the reasons her friend, Karen Boujoukos nominated Chilaka the 2022 Mercy Otis Warren Cape Cod Woman of the Year award.

Who was Mercy Otis Warren?

The honor is in remembrance of War-

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Angelina Chilaka, posing in her Harwich home on May 27, was chosen as this year's Mercy Otis Warren Cape Cod Woman of the Year. She is a retired Harwich High School teacher and an active advocate for public health and social justice.

RON SCHLOERB/CAPE COD TIMES

Chilaka

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ren, who was born in West Barnstable in 1728. She was a playwright, a historian, a pioneer in women's causes, a champion of liberty, an advocate of the Bill of Rights and a patriot.

The award has been given annually with nominations by a committee of volunteers and endorsed by the Barnstable County Board of Regional Commissioners to recognize a woman who exemplifies leadership and has made significant contributions to a Cape community and volunteerism.

Chilaka's significant involvement has been in Harwich, where she was born 71 years ago, as the only child of John Raneo and Augustina Andrade Raneo. Her father was Harwich chief of police for many years. The family was part of a close-knit group of Cape Verdeans, hard workers who helped build the Cape's economy and filled the gap in the labor-intensive cranberry industry.

Chilaka lives in the home her grandfather, an immigrant from Cape Verde, built 99 years ago.

Besides an emphasis on hard work, Chilaka's parents stressed the importance of education for breaking down barriers. She said she got a great education in Harwich public schools, graduating from Harwich High School, and went on to receive her bachelor's degree at Northeastern University and master's degree in health education at Columbia University in New York.

Chilaka, who goes by "Angie," first taught at St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic School in Manhattan for 10 years. She lived in New York for 14 years with her former husband, James, a college professor, and raised three children, Andrea, James and Amanda, all of whom hold professional positions. She has one grandson.

When she moved back to her hometown, she was hired as a health teacher at Harwich High School, a position she held for 30 years until retiring in 2017. She taught because she "loves kids" and liked the high school level "because they do so many more things," she said.

Chilaka got involved in her hometown, partly to get her kids into volunteer activities. While at the high school, she worked with a special education teacher to set up a local Special Olympics program that got all the kids in school involved, she said.

Chilaka ran prom night's "Leadership Lock-in" and was on the safe and drug-free school committee. She taught Red Cross courses to her high school students and has continued to volunteer for the Red Cross in her retirement.

Chilaka started Harwich Children's Fund

Chilaka started the Harwich Children's Fund, the year she retired, because she had long recognized some children in her town were struggling with economic instability. She rallied colleagues, administrators and retired teachers to the cause, a group of most-

ly women because, she said, "Women are the best because they get things done."

For the fund, the group worked through guidance counselors who identified children in need of many things, such as clothing, food, headphones and gift cards for gas. The group also gives money to the town recreation department so the students can participate in activities there.

Her Cape Verdean oral history project with Bill and Brenda Collins also started after retirement. Bill Collins videotapes the sessions while Chilaka interviews elderly Cape Verdeans at the Brooks Library in Harwich.

Chilaka's other educational pursuits also didn't end at retirement. She is a longtime member of the Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Task Force, a racial justice group with the Nauset Interfaith Association, which hosted a diversity conference last summer for 15 teachers on Zoom.

The task force started a drive for diverse books for third-graders, with help from five independent book stores, which asked customers to contribute a book to the project when they bought a book.

"It keeps the businesses going too," Chilaka said.

The first round of books was delivered in the spring to schools on the Lower Cape, and the project will continue on the Mid-Cape and Upper Cape in coming years.

As a Harwich selectman also, Ballantine noted that Chilaka's membership on the Harwich Council on Ag-

ing and the Community Center facilities committee, are a "great tie-in" because they share the same building.

"She's not shy about speaking out, he said. "She provides really good input" especially about behavioral health issues of young people.

"She brings the presence of the Cape Verdeans and is a link with all people who have grown up in town."

Chilaka said being in different groups gives her ideas of what others do.

Chilaka honored among Cape 'Unsung Heroines'

In 2011, she was one of four Cape and Islands women honored as "Unsung Heroines" by the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women. They were among 100 women from across the state who were honored "for being the glue that keeps a community together."

On being named the Mercy Otis Warren Award recipient, Chilaka said she was surprised and honored. "So many other women are doing a lot," she said. She thanked all the other women who have gone before her.

The award will be presented by last year's recipient, Wendy Northcross, at 7 p.m., on June 14 at the 1717 Meetinghouse, 2049 Meetinghouse Way in West Barnstable. The event is free and open to the public.

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