

inside Bergen

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Men's Soccer Nets Region Title, Final Four Appearance

The Bergen Bulldogs men's soccer team filled the trophy case this fall, capturing a Region 19 East Region B title, a national "final four" appearance and numerous individual honors.

Compiling a 15-5-2 overall record this year, the Bulldogs punched their ticket to the 2025 NJCAA Division III Men's Soccer National Championship, notching a 2-0 upset victory in the Region 19 East Region B title game over Camden County College.

As region champion, the Bulldogs travelled to Herkimer Community College (Herkimer, New York) to compete in the national tournament. The Bulldogs downed Northern Essex Community College 3-1 in the first round of the eight-team single elimination tournament. The season ended in a "final four" semifinal matchup against defending national champion – Mohawk Valley Community College, who went on to be this year's champion as well.

Region 19 Coach of the Year Jonathan Sanchez said he had a truly special team. "This group has shown heart, discipline and an unwavering com-

mitment to each other," he said. "To bring Bergen back to the national stage after so many years is a tremendous accomplishment. I couldn't be prouder of our players."

Bergen last competed in the national tournament in 2016. Director of Athletics Erin Van Nostrand said the team has made the College proud.

"This group has shown resilience, discipline and pride in representing Bergen Community College," she said. "This championship reflects the growth and strength across all of Bergen's athletic programs. It showcases the culture we've been building – one centered on accountability, teamwork and academic and athletic excellence."

Individually, winger Jonathan Remache earned Region 19 "Player of the Year" and first-team all-region honors for his consistent leadership and selfless play. Striker Onur Can won Most Outstanding Player of the Region 19 Tournament honors and also made the all-region first-team. Midfielder Khalifa Gassama earned third-team all-region honors. ■

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January 14 - May 6

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NAACP Metuchen Edison Area Branch President Reginald Johnson, Bergen President Eric M. Friedman and NAACP Metuchen Edison Area Branch First Vice President Julia R. Gibson.

President Honored by NAACP

The NAACP Metuchen Edison Area Branch has recognized President Eric M. Friedman with its Booker T. Washington Education Award, celebrating his commitment to providing transformational educational opportunities for all members of the community. The Metuchen Edison branch of the civil rights organization honored Friedman and other community leaders at its annual Freedom Fund Gala that took place October 12 in Somerset. Bergen NJ STARS program coordinator and NAACP Metuchen Edison first vice president Julia Gibson nominated Friedman for the award.

“President Eric M. Friedman received the Booker T. Washington Education Award for his visionary leadership and deep commitment to student success,” Gibson said. “He is an advocate for those he serves and works tirelessly to help students reach their full potential. His dedication to education reflects the very essence of Booker T. Washington’s legacy—empowering others through knowledge, perseverance and purpose.”

The NAACP award represents the latest in Friedman’s career, joining recognitions from organizations such as Phi Theta Kappa, the

honor society of two-year colleges, and the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.

“To be recognized by an organization that works toward eliminating discrimination and accelerating the education of people of color is deeply moving,” Friedman said at the event. “Community colleges transform lives in their communities regardless of race, nationality or socioeconomic status. It’s embedded in community college culture to care about everyone who walks through our doors.”

Friedman has served as Bergen’s president since January 2021. Driven by his signature “ethic of care,” Friedman has reshaped the College’s priorities by focusing on efforts that enhance belongingness, inclusivity and equity. Under Friedman, Bergen’s student enrollment has rebounded from pandemic-era challenges while maintaining the institution’s status as the top destination in New Jersey for associate degree graduates. Recognizing its commitment to continuous improvement and best practices, Bergen received a full reaffirmation of its accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education this summer – a reflection of Friedman’s leadership and preparation for the periodic evaluation.

Bergen’s eighth president earned a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Denver, a master’s degree in humanities and social thought from New York University, and a Ph.D. in sociology from the New School for Social Research. ■

Horticulture at Fifty

Members of the horticulture program, past and present, celebrated 50 years of making Bergen County a greener place in October. New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Ed Wengryn (pictured, top left) delivered the keynote address.

“Fifty years of horticulture at a community college is kind of a record in New Jersey,” he said. “To have one exist and continue to grow and produce professionals in the industry is really something remarkable. You should be really proud of it.”

The event also featured remarks from members of the program’s first graduating class, including Charles Grieco (’77, pictured, top right), and commendations from Rep. Josh Gottheiner (D-5), Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III and the Bergen County Board of Commissioners. Professor Steve Fischer (pictured bottom with Professor Emeritus Sidney Birnback) joined the faculty in 1977 and continues to lead the academic program today. He served as the master of ceremonies for the celebration. ■



Snapshotted



Diwali served as the centerpiece of Bergen's Hindu Heritage Month events.



President Friedman returned to his faculty roots for a Bergen Salon on "the great society."



The College's inaugural Italian Heritage Celebration encouraged participants to mangia!



Students participated in paint therapy on World Mental Health Day.



Paramedic science and surgical technology students collaborated during an interdisciplinary simulation exercise.

Banned Books Week Challenges Censorship

Bergen joined the nation in recognizing “Banned Books Week” in October. The week examines challenged or “banned” books that explore themes of racism, gender identity and sexuality among other social issues.

The College’s Sidney Silverman Library collaborated with Bergenstages and the Bergen Institute for the Creative Arts to host numerous events about challenged literature, including a performance of “Hunterdon.” The performance of the verbatim theatre piece written and directed by Professor Leigh Jonaitis took place in the main campus student center. The story and dialogue follow transcripts of real New Jersey board of education meetings where books became contentious topics.

“I think it’s important to recognize that, when it comes to access, especially in this country, we should be able to access all ideas,” Jonaitis said. “It was really nice to get that opportunity to dig a little more deeply into a subject that I didn’t really know much about until the library started working with me.”

The performance included a faux school board of Bergen faculty and student actors who recited



monologues originally delivered by attendees at the board meetings. Audience members responded, simulating the actual reactions from those meetings.

“Theater is about engaging with both the performers and the audience,” Jonaitis said. “It was the theater piece that was the most exciting part

of it for me. One of the reasons why I was happy to bring it back this year is because I love that experience of students simply walking by and wondering ‘What is going on here?’”

Bergen’s Banned Books Week also included a reading of Khaled Hosseini’s “The Kite Runner” and a screening of George Orwell’s “1984.” ■

Thursdays are Pastry Days

A French pâtisserie? Nope! Ender Hall. Each Thursday, culinary students guided by professors Tomer Zilkha and Christianna Kleinow share a taste of Paris with the College community by offering complimentary fresh breads, pastries and other delicacies for sampling. Behind each pastry is a full day’s work.

“The students begin prepping as early as 9 a.m., sometimes even the day before,” Professor Zilkha said. “It’s a hands-on experience similar to an apprenticeship. They learn from each other and connect with the Bergen community.” Bergen’s courses in pastry arts attract students aspiring to work in the culinary arts field.

Visitors drawn in by the allure of the fresh baked goods also receive a special behind-the-scenes glimpse into the culinary process and the students’ work.

“Connecting with Bergen and seeing everyone happy with the pastries is rewarding,” Zilkha said, noting the semester’s work has included items



such as éclairs, honey cake and seasonal specialties featuring figs.

Having worked in New York and French kitchens since 2003, the accomplished chef knows a thing or two about the power of pastries. Alongside his responsibilities as a faculty member, Zilkha owns and operates Pâtisserie Florentine, a French café and bakery, in Englewood and Closter. ■



Season Two Now Streaming!

In the season two premiere of Bergen Banter, philosophy and religion Professor Clemens Reinke discusses the current state of religious affiliation in the United States, while providing a historical context and a window into the future faithful. Scan to listen. ■



Alumna Adds Flavor to Heritage Celebration

When the College's Hispanic Heritage Month celebration opened with "Empanadas Con Los Empleados" (Empanadas with Employees), an alumna success story stood front and center. Bergen alumna Juliana Koumi ('17, pictured) donated *pandebonos*, a traditional Colombian cheese bread made at her family's business, Carlos' Bagel Shop in Hawthorne.

"I wanted to share something that represents home, while also introducing others to a taste of Colombia's favorite bread," she said.

Carlos' Bagel Shop, which opened in July 2021, includes a variety of Colombian specialties that set it apart from other bakeries and breakfast shops.

"There's truly nothing like it in New Jersey," Koumi said. "Carlos' Bagel Shop was born from my father's lifelong dream. After spending over 20 years working with bagels, he was finally presented with the chance to open his own shop and take something he loved to the next level."

Koumi, who supports her father's management of the business, has assisted with the Hawthorne restaurant's menu, operations and establishing a new creative energy.

"My culture has greatly influenced how I approach business, community and food – especially when developing new ideas and dishes that reflect who we are," she said. "What started as helping my dad quickly became a passion project of my own. Together, we combined his experience and my creative direction to build a space that reflects both tradition and innovation."

Bergen Hispanic Heritage Month Committee member Sierra Dones, invited Koumi to participate in the event.

"I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate my Colombian heritage and share how my roots have shaped me both as a leader and as a creator," she said.

Learn more about Carlos' Bagel Shop at carlos-bagelshop.com. ■



An All-Star Student

The New Jersey Business and Industry Association (NJBIA) has recognized student Alicia Brownstein with its "Rising Star Award." The honor recognizes five female college students who have excelled in the classroom and made significant contributions to their communities. Brownstein received the award at the NJBIA's 11th Annual Women Business Leaders Forum that took place in Franklin Township. Bergen New Jersey STARS Coordinator Julia Gibson nominated her for the honor.

"Alicia's academic success is matched by her leadership potential, innovation and strong work ethic – all attributes that are highly valued by employers, internship providers and scholarship committees," Gibson said. "I nominated her to help spotlight her achievements and increase her visibility for future networking opportunities."

Brownstein acts as an NJ STARS student ambassador, communicating information and resources to prospective NJ STARS students. The NJ STARS program provides tuition-free college for high-achieving high school students. She also serves as a student mentor in the Thrive Program, which aims to engage students in peer-to-peer mentorship by pairing upperclassmen with incoming students to the NJ STARS and Educational Opportunity Fund programs.

"When it comes to open houses and NJ STARS prospective student meetings, I try to be involved and highlight the NJ STARS program at Bergen," she said.

Alongside her NJ STARS involvement, Brownstein also participates in Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society of two-year colleges. Her past community service activities include visiting the Children's Specialized Hospital at RWJBarnabas Health. ■



Trustee Secretary Ritzy Moralez-Diaz, Trustee Sheetal Ranjan, President Eric M. Friedman, Teresa Serio and Trustee Chair Dorothy Blakeslee at the ACCT Congress.

Bergen Noticed in NOLA

Represented by Board of Trustees Chair Dorothy Blakeslee, President Eric M. Friedman and Center for Adult Transition Coordinator Teresa Serio, Bergen had a starring role in the 2025 ACCT Leadership Congress that took place in New Orleans. The Bergen leaders presented "An Innovation of Inclusivity: Fostering a Culture of Belonging Throughout the Campus Community" during the conference's breakout sessions. Highlighting the work of the Office of Specialized Services in creating an inclusive environment for students with intellectual disabilities, the group discussed how all students belong at Bergen. An advocacy organization, the ACCT brings community college leaders together to address real-world challenges and help students succeed through an education. ■



O'Neill, Williams and Dean of Multicultural Services and Activities Deborah Manning (pictured) in the Anna Maria Ciccone Theatre. O'Neill welcomed the opportunity.

"In particular, our heroine, 'Black Chick' is talking about freedom from racism, sexism and self-doubt, which I think is also a universal theme in all of our lives," he said.

Williams said that some of the struggles of 30 years ago – and beyond – still persist today.

"I'm excited for people to see it because I think it speaks to some important themes about race and gender and expectations," she said. "And that intersects really well with the book that I wrote and how stories are so important in our lives and direct what we choose to do."

The event took place as part of the "I Am Free Project," an initiative of O'Neill and Bergen's Center for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation. The project draws inspiration from a song O'Neill wrote about the fall of the Berlin Wall and aims to raise awareness about how freedom and self-reflection can inspire individuals and communities. O'Neill's "I Am Free" song was performed by gospel singer Vaneese Thomas and former Bergen professor Eddie Edwards at the "Black Chick" event. ■

A Revival Thirty Years in the Making

In 1995, Thomas O'Neill – now Bergen's senior technical coordinator – collaborated with activist and author of "Microactivism" Omkari Williams to write a one-woman monologue on freedom, race and self-doubt. O'Neill's inspiration came from someone referring to Williams as "Black Chick" at a party.

In turn, O'Neill penned a monologue that follows the protagonist, "Black Chick," who takes the audience through her ritual healing and connec-

tion with her roots, finding inner peace for herself. The pair completed the project by recording a performance of the play.

Thirty years later, they came back together at Bergen.

Sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Services and Activities, the "Listen to the Black Chick Sing, A Ritual" event featured the taped performance from 30 years ago and a live talkback featuring

First Responders Answer Call for Social Media



Bergen for Business has launched a new initiative to connect first responders with student consultants to enhance their ability to communicate with their communities.

In the first part of the Bergen for Business-sponsored initiative, police, fire and emergency management officials visited the main campus last month for a specialized social media training workshop led by two social media experts from Full House Socials. The workshop aimed to strengthen the online presence of public safety

agencies through effective content planning, community engagement, and real-time crisis communication.

Now, Bergen for Business leaders will pair student consultants with each participating department to provide ongoing support in developing social media strategies, creating content and managing platforms to ensure continued growth and engagement.

Program participants include: the Bergen County Office of Emergency Management, Bergen County Prosecutor's Office, Bergen County Sheriff's Office, Fair Lawn Fire Department, Garfield Police Department, Little Ferry Fire Department, Paramus Police Department, and Teaneck Fire Department.

"Our first responders serve our communities every day, and this is our way of giving back," Bergen for Business Director Linda Caruso said. A Bergen County government grant funded the initiative. ■



Fighting Food Insecurity

Bergen has received a \$27,500 grant from New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education to support the Bergen Cares Center pantry. The initiative provides students with access to fresh food, household items and even a clothing closet in its portfolio of offerings. The Hope Center at Temple University has found that nearly one quarter of community college students experience food insecurity. ■

