

## ITGA's most prestigious award lauds #InThisTogether COVID-19 relief effort

By Amy Gage

The International Town & Gown Association launched the Presidential Excellence Award in 2013 to recognize outstanding leadership, either through volunteer service or educational achievement, according to ITGA Executive Director Beth Bagwell.

Bagwell likes to shine a spotlight on her ITGA members and selfless volunteers. But “selfless” hardly begins to describe the remarkable achievement of Joan Dickinson, this year’s Presidential Excellence honoree, whose COVID-related donation and project management system not only positively impacted the community but improved the daily existence of frontline healthcare workers and caregivers.

As director of community relations at Stony Brook University, Dickinson saw a need in March 2020 just as the pandemic was beginning to rage in the United States, though no more so than in Stony Brook, an hour’s drive east of New York City.

A Tier One research institution, Stony Brook University — part of the State University of New York (SUNY) — has a renowned hospital system that serves as what Dickinson calls the “designated health center” for Suffolk County, with a population of nearly 1.5 million people. Personal protective equipment — better known now as PPE — was in short supply, and people in the surrounding community had rallied and wanted to start donating.

That’s where Dickinson’s wealth of relationships, organizing skills and sheer creativity came into play. “People started showing up randomly to donate,” she recalls. “This was not even a project. It was a confluence of events. Once people started hearing about the hospital workers burning through PPE — which is critical — they wanted to help.”

Michael Arens, assistant vice president of government and community relations at Stony Brook, submitted a nomination to ITGA on Dickinson’s behalf. In it, he noted her “true gift for bringing a large variety of community groups together.”

Dickinson, who joined the university in 1997, served at the center of a team-driven donation drive that collected or coordinated the following:

- 818,250 units of personal protective equipment,
- 33,500 comfort care items,
- 18,000 meals delivered through an online Meal Train program,
- 575 video messages of comfort, and
- 435 iPads that were collected to help patients connect virtually with their families at a time when they couldn’t be with them in person.

Easter 2020 was a stunning success story, with Dickinson creating a quick-turnaround event that let hospital workers “who barely had time to breathe” grab plastic eggs, Godiva chocolates, plants, coloring books and more, in order to celebrate some semblance of a holiday a year ago April. “Thanks to Joan’s ability to mobilize volunteers from student affairs, the president’s office, the alumni relations office, career center and community relations,” said Arens, “many hospital workers had a reason to smile that day.”

### **Commitment and a Calling**

Here, in her words, is how Dickinson and the Stony Brook Hospital Donations Response Team created and staffed the COVID-19 program — and, ultimately, helped to save and improve lives.

**It all started** in mid-March 2020. “New York State set up a temporary hospital and a testing site on campus. Stony Brook became the hub of activity for Suffolk County. We officially launched the donations project on March 20; it ran for 10 weeks. I worked 77 hours the first week we were full steam. It was surreal. I knew I had to keep going.”

**A neighbor dropped off** a box of gloves one day at the campus and Dickinson’s supervisor, Judith Greiman, chief deputy to the president and senior vice president for government and community relations, pointed out the need for a project management system. “That could have been an issue for both the university and the hospital sides of campus if people started randomly showing up, even with the best of intentions. An idea popped into my head, and I saw a way of structuring how we could have people donate safely using appointments, a system for accepting and cataloging the items, and then getting them to the hospital for immediate use. It took the resources of several departments. We had no idea how intense our world would become.”

**PPE was among** the first donations. “Then it became known around campus that we were getting a great response. ‘Can you get us things to help the healthcare workers get through their day?’ So, we started collecting socks, gum, hand lotion, Chapstick. Some doctors and nurses didn’t have time to eat or go to the bathroom. It was so off the rails.”

**The biggest challenge** “was the amount of emotion tied to it all. Every single person who called or emailed to arrange for a donation had a story. They were connected to someone who had died or somebody who was ill, or the hospital saved their loved one or they were an alum and wanted to help. It became emotionally draining, but it was important to listen to them. We were living in a constant state of fear at that time as the daily counts of positive patients kept rising, and people just needed to be heard. When New York went into lockdown, many people felt isolated. For some, they needed to hear that everything was going to be OK.”

**Even before the pandemic**, Stony Brook University Hospital kept employees going with a program called Code Lavender. Launched by Carol Gomes, chief executive officer and chief operation officer, Code Lavender offers crisis management to address the overwhelming emotional and physical work done in a hospital setting. The pandemic amplified the need for

this type of employee care. “We’re still doing it. The program helps hospital workers cope with whatever they are feeling. The hospital also launched Respite Rooms for hospital employees when they needed to catch their breath for a few minutes. The rooms had a bed, a chair, a TV and a snack room within the suite.”

“Power Networker” and “Public Speaking” are among the attributes Dickinson lists on her LinkedIn profile. “Relationship building served me best on this project. I believe in finding common ground and working in teams. I’m not silo oriented. Just recently I had a cross-campus proposal approved to help employees transition back to campus. It’s a lot of the same folks who helped with the donation drive. The more successes you have in collaboration, the more others will follow suit. Things truly do come out better when we all work together.”

ITGA Board President Emily Allen agrees. She made the decision to grant Dickinson the prestigious Presidential Excellence Award because of Dickinson’s collaborative spirit and community-focused skills.

“The Stony Brook University Hospital’s donation program stood on a foundation of trust,” said Allen, chief of staff in the Office of the Provost at Colorado State University. “Joan Dickinson and the entire team were able to pivot operations and step up for the community because of the hard work they had already put in to constructing strong relationships.”

*Amy Gage is director of neighborhood and community relations at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a proud member of ITGA.*

**Web links for underlined copy:**

<https://www.itga.org/>

<https://www.stonybrook.edu/community-relations/about/>

<https://www.stonybrook.edu/>

<https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/sbuh> [https://news.stonybrook.edu/sb\\_medicine/donor-spotlight-stepping-up-to-support-sbuh-responders/](https://news.stonybrook.edu/sb_medicine/donor-spotlight-stepping-up-to-support-sbuh-responders/)

[https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/code\\_lavender\\_caring\\_for\\_our\\_caregivers](https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/code_lavender_caring_for_our_caregivers)

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