

Autism Expert Sandra Harris Receives First Research in Service to New Jersey Award; President Awards Seed Money to Five Projects

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NEW BRUNSWICK/PISCATAWAY, N.J. – Sandra Lee Harris, whose pioneering work with autistic children and adults has touched thousands of individuals and families in the state, has received the first President’s Award for Research in Service to New Jersey from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Harris was honored by Rutgers President Richard L. McCormick as part of his new Program for Research in Service to New Jersey, recognizing outstanding research and programming initiatives that service the interest of New Jersey citizens.

Harris, Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor of Psychology, has taught for 36 years at Rutgers in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology. She is the founder and executive director of the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center, which provides educational and therapeutic services to children and adults with autism and to their families. She was recognized for her work at the center and her dedication to understanding autism and its effects on sufferers and their families.

“Dr. Harris has touched the lives of thousands of individuals and their families and profoundly enhanced that most fundamental of human conditions, the ability of each person to reach his or her potential,” McCormick said.

In addition to Harris’ award, McCormick distributed seed grants to five Rutgers projects. These awards went to Paul Hirschfield, sociology, for an evaluation model for young offenders re-entering society; Carol Kuhlthau, Ross Todd and Mark Winston, information and library studies, to study research as a basis for enhancing learning for elementary and secondary students in poor communities; Eileen Appelbaum, director of the Center for Women and Work, to study family leave and work-life balance for parents of children with serious illnesses; Marc Holzer and Alan Zalkind, of the department of public administration at Rutgers-Newark, to establish a performance measurement consortium for public sector productivity; and Gloria Bonilla-Santiago and James J. Garnett, of the department of public administration at Rutgers-Camden, for the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership.

Harris came to Rutgers in 1969 and started the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center on the Douglass campus in 1972 to provide an opportunity for undergraduates to work closely with developmentally disabled people. Children with autism and their families soon became the center’s main focus.

Harris' own epiphany came when she worked with an autistic boy who had severe self-injury problems, and for whom none of the traditional therapies seemed to work. Harris' experience with him was both rewarding and frustrating. She and her colleagues were able to help him some, but not enough to make a profound impact on his life.

“That experience was a big part of what captured me,” she says. “And the other part was that with other kids and their families we did see significant improvement, and my colleagues and I thought this was a population we could help.”

Today, the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center operates a school, offers outreach to schools throughout the state, and performs diagnostic work and academic research. Graduate students come from around the country to work with people with autism and to study at the center.

The original reason for the center's founding – undergraduate education – is still an important part of the program. Undergraduates come from all over the university and from many disciplines to work with children on the autistic spectrum, and many go on to specialize in autism as therapists or educators. Reflecting on more than 30 years of work at Rutgers, Harris says, “I've been very fortunate, because Rutgers has allowed me to integrate my research with service to the community in just the right way.”

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