

Robert Bielsky Awards At Touro College

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Three Touro College students recently received the Robert Bielsky Special Recognition Award for Personal Achievement, a scholarship prize given in honor of the Bielski Brigade—a band of Jewish partisans who fought against the Nazis in the forests of Belorussia in the Soviet Union beginning in 1941 and saved 1,200 Jewish men, women, and children.

The award has been presented annually for the past decade to Touro College students who, despite personal challenges such as illnesses or deaths in their families, have continued to pursue their educations. All students attending any of Touro College's New York schools are eligible to receive this award. The award was established by Dr. Lester Eckman, a Holocaust survivor and, for the past 40 years, a distinguished professor at Touro College. Dr. Eckman befriended the three brothers who formed the Bielski Brigade that harbored Jewish families and conducted raids against the German occupiers, derailing troop trains, ambushing soldiers, blowing up bridges and electric stations, and punishing collaborators. The story of this partisan group was recently depicted in the film *Defiance*.

Dr. Bernard Lander, president of Touro College, established the Center for the Study of Partisans and Jewish Heroism at Touro College and appointed Dr. Eckman as its director. "Presenting the Bielsky Award to deserving students is a way for me to honor my father's memory while giving something back to the community," Mr. Bielski said. "The recipients of this award have demonstrated great bravery and determination in the face of adversity and we wish them great success as they continue their education and go on to fulfilling careers."

This year's awards were announced at commencement ceremonies of Touro New York School of Career and Applied Studies (NYSCAS) by Robert Bielsky, whose father, the late Tuvia Bielski (Robert spells his surname differently from his father), was one of three brothers who formed the Bielski Brigade. Today, there's a sense of community among all those who survived. Of the four original Bielski partisans, only Aron, the youngest, is still alive.

James Millner of Brooklyn, one of the recipients, earned a bachelor's degree in education and psychology while caring for three adult brothers, two who suffer from dementia and a third who has Down syndrome. A hard worker and student leader, Millner said he had plans to study for a master's degree in special education at Touro College this fall. "I won't deny that it was difficult keeping up with my studies while maintaining a household for my brothers," he said. "But I recognize the importance of an education and pushed on. Touro College's good intentions are certainly helping me pursue my goal of becoming a special-education teacher."

Other students who received Bielsky Awards include Belkis Jimenez and Tiffany Hickey, both of Brooklyn.

Belkis Jimenez of Brooklyn has undergone several surgeries while pursuing her studies and has managed to keep her promise to her mother that she would continue her education and graduate. Following graduation, she plans to pursue state licensing as a bilingual education teacher and return to Touro College to obtain a psychology degree. Tiffany Hickey, despite a serious illness, plans to continue her education by applying to the School of Health Sciences to pursue a degree in occupational therapy.

Previous Bielsky Award recipients include a young woman who, while a student at Touro College, battled cancer while maintaining a busy and productive schedule and now works as a certified teacher of special education in an elementary school; and a mother of three and a recent immigrant to the United States who, in spite of considerable financial difficulties, was able to obtain her bachelor's degree in accounting while participating in Touro College's work-study program.