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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Liberty ARC Celebrates Community Relationships at Annual Meeting

Amsterdam – Liberty ARC celebrated their dedicated community partners for their unwavering commitment in making the area a better place for all at their Annual Meeting.

The event was held at Glen Sanders Mansion in Scotia in May. Liberty ARC's bell choir, The Bell Tones, received the agency's Community Commitment Award and New York State Trooper and Investigator TJ McHugh was recognized with Liberty ARC's Community Partner Award.

The Bell Tones, Liberty ARC's bell choir, is a talented group that loves to perform throughout the community, especially for local senior citizens at nursing homes. The group has been performing for 10 years, under the direction of Susan Jones, an Assistant Habilitation Specialist in Liberty ARC's day hab programs. Those who take part in the choir are proud of being a part of this group and committed to the choir as they practice every Friday afternoon in order to be their best when it comes time to share their musical talents. The Bell Tones travel across Montgomery County and also visit neighboring communities, like Saratoga Springs, to perform.

"The Bell Tones are truly a group of people who are full of love, compassion, and positivity to everyone they encounter in their community and within the agency. They want to share their talents with people who are unable to go out independently and enjoy music," said Candace Opalka, Liberty ARC's Chief Operating Officer. "Their kindness and outreach to those in need exemplifies the true spirit of this award. We are so proud of this hard-working group and their mentor, Sue Jones, for the time they put into perfecting their craft and for spreading joy to all they meet."

"It has been an honor to work with the Bell Tones for the past 10 years," Jones said. "It has been one of the most rewarding periods of my career with Liberty ARC. I have had the privilege to watch each

participant grow with the program. It was a surprise to learn they were winning an award for their work in the community. I am so happy to see them receiving such deserving recognition.”

For over three years, McHugh, with Troop G of the New York State Police (NYSP), has gone above and beyond for the people supported in Liberty’s Careers For Me (CFM) program. CFM is an experiential learning program designed for persons to explore vocational interests and prepare for employment through community engagement and hands-on discovery. Over the past three years, McHugh has dedicated 50 hours to educating past and present Careers For Me participants about careers at NYSP while building deep and meaningful connections with each individual. McHugh also inspired the creation of “Law Enforcement Career Month,” where he has engaged in career interviews and provided valuable insight into the many opportunities available in law enforcement for CFM to pursue if they so wish.

Beyond career education, TJ has helped change lives and perceptions, demonstrating the compassion and humanity behind law enforcement and fostering a sense of safety and empowerment. His impact has been profound—helping individuals overcome their fear of police officers, especially those with past traumatic experiences.

“Trooper McHugh, with his kindness and unwavering commitment to those we support at Liberty ARC over the past three years, is so deserving of this award,” said Liberty ARC CEO Jennifer Saunders. “This is also a wonderful way to recognize him as he approaches his final year with Careers For Me and to express our deepest gratitude for his dedication, compassion, commitment, and generosity that has shaped so many lives. It is evident that Trooper McHugh is more than a mentor to CFM participations, he is a hero.”

“Being recognized with this award is an honor and a meaningful validation to the journey that has been my engagement with the CFM crew,” McHugh said. “It shows the importance of community engagement and staying true to the values that I hold as a Trooper. This relationship allows an opportunity that most people don’t have, the ability to ask questions and learn what police officers do on a regular basis. Too frequently judgment is passed and opinions are made from something they heard from a friend or saw on social media. The goals of Careers For Me are aligned with mine in creating an opportunity for this special crew to have that positive experience with law enforcement and to give them a chance to talk to police officers, fire fighters, and various members of the community, what we all do, how we are there to help them, and keep them all safe.”

Liberty ARC also recognized their Employees of the Year during the meeting. The following outstanding employees were honored:

- Program Employee of the Year/James H. & Barbara H. Schliff Award – Karen Allen, Senior Habilitation Coordinator
- Support Employee of the Year – Beverly Salvo, Public Relations Administrative Assistant
- Manager of the Year – Amy Gifford, Residential Manager
- Assistant Director of the Year – Tamara Schmidtman, Assistant Director of Operations

Special recognition was given to 18 people who receive supports and services from Liberty ARC for being with the agency for 35, 40, 45, 50, and 55 years.

The following board members were honored for their milestone years of service: Kim Brumley for five years of service to the Liberty ARC Board of Directors; Michael Lobb for five years of service to the Liberty Foundation Board of Directors; and Brett Harris for 10 years of service to the Liberty Foundation Board of Directors.

Sworn in as Liberty ARC Board officers for the 2025-2026 term were: Deborah Slezak, president; John Bresonis, vice president; Brandon Waylett, secretary; Carl Pucci, treasurer. The following directors were sworn in for the 2025-2027 term: Karen Bona, John Bresonis, Kim Brumley, David Fariello, Tammy Krisher, Karreene O'Neil, Sally Romano, and Deborah Slezak.

About Liberty ARC

Liberty ARC, a chapter of The Arc New York, is a not-for-profit agency that provides top-quality supports and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Montgomery and Schenectady Counties. We are proud of our six decades of bringing these innovative and valuable programs to those most vulnerable in our community. While staying committed to our framework the agency has grown our employment, residential, day supports, family support and health-related programming throughout the years. Our mission- *Together we support people with disabilities to achieve a quality of life each person values* - together with our *Values* make up the foundation on which our culture is framed. We are extremely proud to be a pioneering agency, which coupled with a dynamic workforce and our person-centered mission makes Liberty ARC a stand-out in our field.

About The Arc New York

The Arc New York is the largest provider of supports and services for people intellectual and developmental disabilities in New York state. The 35 local Chapters of The Arc New York collectively support more than 60,000 people with disabilities and their families in every county of the state, and employ more than 30,000 people in the shared mission to provide people with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities the ordinary and extraordinary opportunities of life. Founded by families more than 75 years ago, The Arc New York continues to be an influential advocate for the rights, opportunities, and inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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