

## MORRISTOWN ARTIST RON RITZIE HONORED IN NYC FOR PROMOTING POLICE/YOUTH RELATIONS

November 22, 2016 by Kevin Coughlin

Morristown artist Ron Ritzie is a busy guy. When he's not painting eye-popping murals or mentoring future artists at the Morristown Neighborhood House, he is doing his part to improve relations between police and teens in New York City.

Ritzie was honored last week for his work with **Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids**.

It's a series of theatrically produced forums in which police and youths share their experiences, in an effort to break down stereotypes, humanize each other, and minimize chances of negative encounters on the street.

"I'm very proud of this. I will continue to do this work. It's very important," said Ritzie, 58, who received a Founder's award recognizing his three years with the organization, at a benefit in the city.

Operation Conversation started a decade ago as a program of the **All Stars Project Inc.**, a nonprofit co-founded 35 years ago by **Lenora Fulani**, a psychologist, activist and community organizer who in 1988 became the first woman and the first African American to get on the presidential ballot in all 50 states.

In her prepared remarks, Fulani praised Ritzie for the "boundless energy and infectious spirit" he brings to Cops & Kids workshops, where he assists backstage to make the events run smoothly. He also has helped at workshops for New York Police probationary officers.

A Morristown High School graduate, Ritzie studied art at the County College of Morris and Fairleigh Dickinson University. He got involved with Operation Conversation through another All Stars venture, the **Castillo Theatre**.

The Manhattan venue's avante-garde productions tackle contemporary and historical social issues. Ritzie said he has performed assorted roles there, from creating Playbill artwork to line production duties. But he is especially passionate about Operation Conversation.

"In light of all that's going on in this country with cops and kids and misunderstandings, here we have an opportunity to bring kids together where they can discuss their fears, and build trust with police officers," said Ritzie.

He is hopeful of exporting it to his hometown. He made a convert of Morristown Mayor Tim Dougherty and his wife, Mary Dougherty, who came to see a Cops & Kids workshop at Harlem's famed Apollo Theater.

"It was one of the most amazing events I've ever been a part of... it was moving," said the Mayor, who described Ritzie as "an amazing person."

"He's so community-minded. He talks straight to you. He's very conscious of what's going on in the world around us," he said.

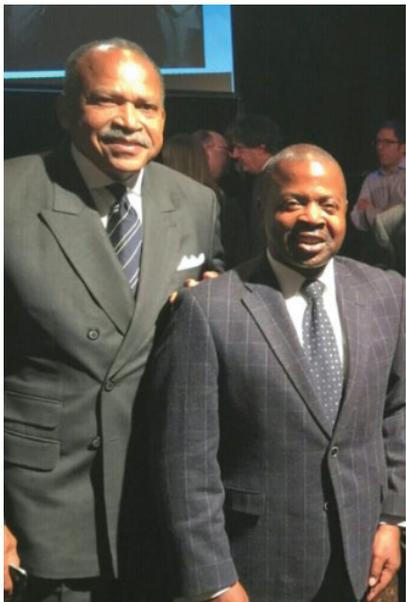
Ritzie also has introduced the program to incoming Morris County Sheriff James Gannon.

Mayor Dougherty said he hopes to work with Ritzie and Gannon to bring Operation Conversation to Morristown's Mayo Performing Arts Center.

"With Ron's help, we can bring that type of program here for an amazing event for the whole county," the Mayor said.



Ron Ritzie, left, with Craig Bannister of Spectrum Arts Productions and All Star Project co-founder Lenora Fulani.



NY First Deputy Police Commissioner Benjamin Tucker and Ron Ritzie.