

Extraordinary Westfield HS Seniors awarded with First Congregational Church Alexander Award

The Trustees of **First Congregational Church of Westfield** presented the church's annual **Alexander Award** to distinguished Westfield High School graduating seniors and active youth members **Sophia Andersen, Mason Marino** and **Flannery Schifando**. Named in memory of Edna and John Alexander, members of FCC for 70 years, the award is given annually to one or more high school seniors who have made a significant contribution to the life of the church.

Sophia Andersen began attending worship services with her family when she was in second grade. As she grew up in the church, Sophia has been actively involved in service and social activities and as a youth leader in Youth Fellowship, was a Youth Representative on the Board of Deacons, completed Confirmation, performed in the annual Christmas pageants, and during the pandemic worked on the "tech crew" to film and broadcast worship services online for those participating from home. Outside of church, Sophia played intercounty soccer and participated in the Westfield High School Art Club and served as an officer in 11th grade. She is a member of the National Art Honor Society and worked as a Receptionist at Facial Reality Spa in Westfield.

In her essay for Award consideration Sophia wrote: "I consider myself so lucky to have been going here for a decade now. The lessons and skills I have learned here, and the experiences I was able to have, are so important to me. FCC is a formative part of who I am... I am so proud to say that."

In August Sophia will begin her studies at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Mason Marino also started participating in worship services with his family at the young age of seven. As he grew older, he participated in FCC's Youth Fellowship from 2018-2023 as a Youth Leader. Mason also traveled with the group on three summer Mission Trips to Denver, North Carolina and Miami serving each community in a variety of activities, learning valuable lessons about each and coming away from the experience with new perspectives on his own life. At Westfield High School Mason has participated on the Varsity Track and Football teams, various WHS Choirs, including the Central Jersey Music Educator's Association All-Region Choir, and was Counselor of the WHS Weightlifting Club.

Mason is clear on how FCC has been an important part of his life: "It isn't just a place of worship, it's a community. Nothing quite sums up that dynamic like our annual mission trips. Going out with other youth and members of the congregation in a place I've never been, has always pushed me to grow and connect with the people around me. I learned very quickly that the people sitting in the pews when I first walked in would not just be there to take part in service, they would be a part of my FCC family. They would be there to support me and everyone else in the hard times like the pandemic, and to celebrate in the good times. Everything about the FCC community allows for people like me to feel free in life knowing that no matter what, the members of FCC will have my back."

In the fall Mason will attend Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Flannery Schifando and her family arrived at FCC when she was very young. She sang in the youngest of the children's choirs (Pilgrim Singers) from Preschool through third grade, then advanced to the Leyden Choir in fourth through sixth grade, performing in the annual Children's musical every spring. In addition, Flannery was an active participant in the annual Christmas pageant and Advent Festival. She served as a Youth Leader in Youth Fellowship, and volunteered to help with the annual spring Cake Auction and Spaghetti Supper & Talent Show fundraisers for Heifer International and the annual Mission Trip (respectively), helped prepare bagged lunches for the Bridges Outreach and delivered the meals and other crucial supplies to the homeless in NYC and other cities in NJ, bagged and packed nonperishable items at the Community Food Bank of NJ, participated in Game Nights with Waysharers, a group established to provide social activities for adults with developmental disabilities, at the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless Super Bowl Party where FCC youth would distribute donations and interacting with the visitors, among many other initiatives. Flannery traveled on Mission Trips to North Carolina and Miami... unfortunately, COVID prevented the trips that were planned for 2020 – 2022. In school, Flannery was a Girl Scout (K-8) earning her Bronze Award by raising money selling ice pops after school to purchase a Buddy Bench for Tamaques School, and her Silver Award hosting a monthly crafting class at Westfield Senior Housing. Flannery has also participated with the Broadway Singers (sixth – eighth grade) and played on the WHS Girls Ice Hockey team through high school.

In her application essay, Flannery explained her feelings about First Congregational Church: "For me, First Congregational Church is a break from the outside world that allows me to focus inward. The Church has shown me the value of love, friendship without judgment, happiness, and spirituality. These are things that school, social media, and society sometimes overlook. We are a family that sticks together through thick and thin, and I hope to find a family similar to the one we have here while at school in Philadelphia."

Flannery will be attending Drexel University College of Media Arts & Design in the fall.

"I'm so proud of these three young people, in whom we see God's vision for our church community come to fruition," Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. Jennifer Testa Hrynyk shared. "We now send them out with our blessing, knowing that we have done our best to prepare them with the foundation of faith and community that will always remind them of who and whose they are."

The three honorees were invited to speak for a few moments each as part of the morning's sermon, each commenting about the role that the FCC church family has played in shaping their lives. The full worship service can be found [here](#).

"The reviewing committee was most impressed with this year's submissions and is delighted to be able to award three scholarships this year," stated **Wendy Masterson** of the FCC Board of Ministries. "Their dedication to our church is impressive, but all of us who read their

applications were most touched by how passionately they spoke about the FCC community. I know Edna and John Alexander would be very proud of these recipients.”

In addition to honoring these leaders of the future on June 11, FCC also recognized all of the graduates within the church family, including milestones in elementary, middle and high school and at the university level.

FCC is a welcoming, inclusive, open-minded Christian community that has discovered the freedom and joy a spiritual life offers. Our ministry is committed to sharing God’s love through service to others, thought-provoking worship, and fostering faith among generations.

We aspire to nourish the individual on their spiritual journey; explore the intersection of community and faith; and remain faithful to God’s vision in a changing world.

First Congregational Church is located at 125 Elmer Street, Westfield. Weekly Sunday Worship begins at 10am and is open to anyone who seeks an inclusive Christian community. For additional information on worship services, outreach efforts and programs for all ages, please call (908) 233-2494 or visit fccofwestfield.org, and follow FCC on Facebook @FCCWestfield.