



OP-ED "Why Celebrate NJ?"
January 12, 2007

As President of Celebrate NJ!, a grassroots organization whose mission is to bring pride to our Garden State, I am often asked questions like, "With all of the issues facing NJ like corrupt politicians, high property taxes, crazy traffic, etc., why should I care about celebrating NJ?" It's a legitimate question that deserves a legitimate answer.

Since the time of the American Revolution, New Jersey has been treated as a second-class citizen. Squeezed between New York and Philadelphia, Franklin called it "a barrel tapped at both ends". Even today, when people speak about it, it's mostly in the form of a joke or some negative comment about the smell along a small stretch of the turnpike or corrupt politicians, or the high cost of living.

Now, like most of us who live here, I was born and raised here. Educated and raised my family here. Owned property here. Run a business here. I read the papers and listen to the news. I know we have problems. What State doesn't? But I've also lived here long enough to know that there is clearly another side to the story, and that's the one we don't hear all that much about. It's the part that tells the story of what we love about New Jersey, what we feel proud of, what we can celebrate about life here in the Garden State.

One of our initiatives is a campaign called "365 Reasons to Celebrate NJ!" Over 1,000 New Jerseyans have entered their reason on our website, so I have no lack of material. My space is limited, so here's the short list: 127 miles of clean, beautiful beaches, 145 different ethnic communities co-existing peacefully, diversity of geography including lakes, rivers, mountains, cities, suburbs, horse farms, pine barrens, and seaside. Home of famous inventors and "firsts" from Edison's lab to Einstein's alley. Famous people including hundreds of celebrities, great athletes, an astronaut, and two presidents. The home of band-aids, motion pictures, bubble wrap, canned foods and the submarine. Gateway to America at Ellis Island and America's medicine cabinet as headquarters for most major pharmaceutical companies. Educational opportunities and institutions greater in number per capita than most other states. An amazing variety of great seafood and fresh produce. Wonderful restaurants. I could go on.

So why should we care if the Jay Leno's of the world roast us on the spit? It's all in fun, isn't it? Well, think about what kind of message we're sending to our kids. If the talk at dinner is about how NJ stinks and the politicians stink and it's too expensive to live here, why wouldn't our kids want to leave here the first chance they get? Despite the quality education they could get here and the abundant work opportunities, they can't wait to get out of NJ. (That's not to say they won't return for the Shore in the summer!) But seriously, how can we inspire our kids—the future leaders and business owners and parents of New Jersey—to both preserve what's wonderful here and to create a legacy we can be proud of, if we don't start teaching them what we love about New Jersey?

Last year, Celebrate NJ! created a 4th grade program to do just that. Thousands of kids from all over NJ learned about the people, places, history, and events that make NJ the prominent place it is in our country and the world. Yes, prominent. The place where our freedom was won during the American Revolution. The place where the first town was wired for electric light. The place where most of our ancestors first stepped into this country to take a shot at the American dream. That's right...New Jersey.

I believe that if we want things to be different, we have to do something different. I don't know about you, but I've had enough of what doesn't work. I'm ready for something different here. Think about the possibility of having state and business leadership made up of kids who learned to be proud of where they come from, who value what's important here. By educating and inspiring our children now, we plant seeds for a different New Jersey in the future. Want to eliminate corruption, create a fair system, and preserve our resources? Begin with our kids. Inspire them and then let them inspire us. In the meantime, here's something we all can do. The next time someone takes a shot at NJ in your presence, don't take it. Instead, use it as a chance to educate them about New Jersey's greatness. Tell them what you love about it. Imagine the impact of 8 million of us doing that. It's powerful. It's the way we begin to change things. Join me.

Karen Hatcher is President of Celebrate NJ! Inc., a non-profit group located in Bradley Beach, NJ, whose mission is to build pride in and forward a positive future for New Jersey. For more information, go to www.CelebrateNJ.org or to reach her directly, call 732-361-3253 or email khatcher@celebrateNJ.org.