

## A look back at 2009

As the first weekend of the new year draws to a close and most people brace themselves to return to work or school, take some time to take a look back at 2009 before it fades away into the mist of history and remember the people and organizations who can be counted among the region's assets.

The just-concluded year was depressingly similar to 2008 in terms of joblessness and general anxiety. As was the case with the year it succeeded, however, 2009 offered evidence of philanthropy, determination and hope.

Among this region's abundant resources are youngsters eager to help others — even after they overcame hardships themselves. That group includes teenager Sara Hutton of Hurley. Hutton, who underwent heart surgery when she was 15 months old, has dedicated most of her young life to raise money and help various organizations. Her efforts included a concert she performed in and a silent auction to benefit a Massachusetts camp that she attended for children who had undergone open-heart surgery.

**There was also Sara-Elizabeth Clark of Gardiner. Diagnosed with epilepsy at 16 months of age, her response would include creating what would become an annual event, "Sara's Walk," at age 10 to increase awareness about the disorder. In the fall, her biography, "Being Sara," was released. More information about Clark and the book is available online at her Web site, [www.itsnotwhoiam.com](http://www.itsnotwhoiam.com).**

Born with a birthmark on his face, Evan Ducker of Kingston overcame stares and thoughtless questions to become an advocate for education. This past year saw him featured on bags of Doritos chips and his nomination as a finalist for the "Do Something" awards, which honors the nation's best young world changers. He also traveled to Ireland to speak at a hospital, was interviewed former basketball star and U.S. senator Bill Bradley and received letters of thanks from other people with birthmarks for his efforts.

More information about Ducker is available online at [www.buddyboobysbirthmark.com](http://www.buddyboobysbirthmark.com). The address is taken from the children's book Ducker and his mother, Donna Ducker, collaborated on when he was 4 1/2.

Local youngsters nagged about spending too much time playing videogames could bring up Onteora High School student Bobby Lovaglio-Emry in their defense. Back in March, the Freeman told how the then-freshman was teaching a group of graduate education Master's degree students in the area of gaming research and assessment. It was for a program called "Educational Media Design and Technology Master of Science" offered by Full Sail University.

New Paltz High School student Jordan Berger got a head start on building up a resume when she won an engineering competition that featured entries from some 200 other high school students. Her winning project was a plastic toy cube that would, in theory, replace the old wooden blocks traditionally used to introduce babies to the English alphabet. She designed a block that had a letter or its equivalent represented in English, Morse code, Braille, Hebrew and Hindi.

A trip to Ethiopia to meet the child her family adopted resulted in Rhinebeck High School student Gwenn Gideon witnessing scenes of extreme poverty. It resulted in her starting up a student-run theater company, "Act 2 Act." Its mission is to raise awareness about human rights abuses worldwide and to donate all net receipts to organizations that address human rights abuses.

The inhabitants of the Ulster County SPCA found a benefactor in Johnny Moore of Port Ewen. At age 10, he had already conducted a supplies and fund-raising drive for the organization for two straight years. He also spent time at the local SPCA exercising the animals.

The Ulster County SPCA has a youth volunteer program that gives youngsters a chance to be involved. For more information about the organization, call (845) 331-5377, send an e-mail to [info@ucspca.org](mailto:info@ucspca.org) or go online to [www.ucspca.org](http://www.ucspca.org).

At a time when economic turbulence frequently extends to animals, Paws Unlimited in Kingston offers a refuge to homeless dogs. Shari Bach, president and founder of the Paws Unlimited Foundation, said in an article in late November that 40 dogs had been adopted in nine months and several more were pending.

Paws Unlimited welcomes volunteers to walk and play with the dogs it rescues. It also encourages people to provide temporary foster homes. Call Paws Unlimited at (845) 336-7297 or send an e-mail to Bach at [sbach@pawsunlimited.com](mailto:sbach@pawsunlimited.com) for more information.

A lengthy record of service — ranging from being a co-founder of The Daily Bread Soup Kitchen in Woodstock to serving as volunteer executive director (in addition to four other posts) with the Ulster Literacy Foundation — led to Victoria Langling being named a Woman of Distinction by the state Senate. For those who lack her energy, Langling said it's still possible to make an impact.

"Give an hour a week, nourish your soul and make the world a better place," she said.

The year also featured stories of local residents traveling elsewhere to aid others. Kingston High School graduate Kacie Williams recounted spending nearly two months in Cape Town, South Africa, where she spent most of her time teaching English at a refugee center. The experience, which included seeing widespread deprivation, left with a deeper appreciation for what she has and gave her clarity as to what she wanted to do with her life.

"I know now that I want to make a difference toward a significant cause," she said.

Kingston resident Erin Gilfeather didn't have to travel nearly as far to assist those in need. Last winter, as a nursing student at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, she joined a group that traveled to the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky to provide basic medical services in an area where it was estimated more than a third of the population was living in poverty.

"You don't really understand it until you're there yourself," she said. Gilfeather added, however, that she also encountered people who were grateful for what they had and not resentful about what they lacked.

In a year where there didn't seem to be a great deal to laugh at, Ray Faiola and Joe Bevilacqua did their part to fill the humor void by starting an Ellenville chapter of "The Sons of the Desert," an international group dedicated to the comedic duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Their chapter, or "tent," is called "Them Thar Hills," a name taken from one of the duo's films.

More information about the local chapter is available online at [www.themtharhills.org](http://www.themtharhills.org).

A couple of stories in 2009 led to feelings of *deja vu*, with former residents returning to the region. Saugerties native John-Anthony Bruno came back to Ulster County to serve as the new executive director of the county's Red Cross chapter. Kingston High School students participating in last spring's production of "Fiddler on the Roof" got assistance from KHS alums Michael McCord and Jenn Zell, both of whom performed in stage shows as students.

The year saw several prominent people close out their careers. In January, the Rev. Gerald Gallagher stepped down as rector of the Church of the Messiah in Rhinebeck after 24 years. Over the summer, Alfred Sweet ended a stint lasting some 30 years as the Woodstock Chamber Orchestra's executive director. And, just last week, Beverly Finnegan, regional vice president of the American Cancer Society, reflected on her 32 years with the organization prior to retiring. She will serve as a volunteer, however.

Other people profiled this year proved that neither retirement nor advanced years are synonymous with retirement. A year after leaving St. Christopher's Church in Red Hook, Monsignor Charles Coen keeps busy by displaying his musical talents at The Rhinecliff and being involved with The Irish Cultural Center in East Durham.

Then there's Nicholas Attanasio of Lake Katrine. Some three-quarters of a century after he began a musical career that has seen him enshrined in three halls of fame, the 87-year-old Attanasio continues to play his drum and teach. People interested in learning how to play the drum can send him an e-mail at [basssticks@aol.com](mailto:basssticks@aol.com).

For those who believe the future offers little hope, consider the story of brothers Dwayne Gavner, Scott Whispell and Michael Green.

In 1974, Dwayne, Michael and a third sibling, Raymond, were taken from their home and adopted or placed with foster families. Scott, who remained with his mother, reunited in 2005 with Dwayne, who was adopted by a family in Saugerties. Raymond, who now lives under the adopted name of Jason Palmer, was found shortly after that. Michael's whereabouts were unknown, however, and the reunited brothers held out little hope of finding him.

Then in January, Michael, while surfing the Internet at his Las Vegas home, typed the words "Port Ewen adoption" into a search engine. The name Michael Whispell appeared with a link to a Web site, [adoption.com](http://adoption.com).

Initially disbelieving, he clicked on the link and found information about his brothers, mother, father and aunts. He made a call to an aunt in Kingston the next day, leading to family reunion in April.

The new year will reveal more stories about people who stand out because of their charitable endeavors, their triumphs over adversity, their talents or other attributes. Do you know people who aid others for all the right reasons? People who belong to organizations or movements that benefit their friends and neighbors? People who have helped others back from catastrophes physical or emotional? Or people who have accomplished something others should know about?

We'd like to know about them. It helps if the person is unique in some way, can bring attention to problems that warrant more education or works for a group that is new to the area and needs introduction to Freeman readers.