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Christopher Columbus' News Network honors local TV personalities in first annual Media Excellence Awards

By Howard Cohen
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DANIEL BOCK / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Senior Joseph Cacioppo, 17, a member of the Christopher Columbus News Network, anchors the entertainment segment of the morning news show at the Catholic high school in Westchester.

Christopher Columbus High School's student-run television station, CCNN Live, has racked up its share of district, state and national awards. So now the private boys' Catholic high school in West Miami-Dade wants to hand out its own awards.

CCNN Live students, who broadcast 20-minute segments on school and national news, features, entertainment and sports for the school, is turning the spotlight on local TV personalities by creating its version of the Emmys.

On April 12, Columbus will host the first annual Media Excellence Awards in its school cafeteria. The room will be transformed into an auditorium, complete with professional lighting, hosting by WSVN-7 meteorologist Vivian Gonzalez, dinner and cocktails, and a green room where winners will be interviewed by students from local high schools who will

be invited to take part, said CCNN Live Advisory Board member Mick Maspons, one of the alums who helped conceive the idea for the awards fundraiser.

Think Hollywood's Golden Globes gone Westchester.

"It is fantastic that these unique school programs allow students to apply their knowledge in subjects such as English, writing, sciences, sports and creative arts into practice through producing quality programming and informing the school community of the latest news," said Gonzalez, who is a nominee as Best Weather Personality, along with John Morales of NBC 6 and Stephanie Severino of Univision.

Local media stations, and the nominees who are culled from the six major networks — ABC-Channel 10, CBS4, NBC 6, Telemundo, Univision and WSVN-7 — are taking the awards seriously.

"I got my first taste of journalism at my high school newspaper, The Royal Courier, at LaSalle High School, where I started out as the editorial cartoonist. So I know that high school journalists take their craft seriously, especially today when schools have so many resources to offer student journalists," said CBS4 reporter Elliott Rodriguez, who is nominated in the Best On-Air Personality category against Pamela Giganti of NBC 6 and Laurie Jennings of ABC-Channel 10.

The awards will honor local television personalities in seven categories, including Best On-Air Personality, Field Reporter, Sports Reporter, Entertainment Reporter, Weather Personality, Local News Station and, in keeping with the times, Best Use of Social Media.

"I love that high schoolers are even reading my feed. Because, let's face it, my social media is quite . . . varied," said Social Media nominee Liz Roldan of CBS4. "I'll talk about breaking news, big stories, fashion or shoes on any given day. I'm not your average 'news Twitter feed,' that's for sure."

But that's the kind of reach and personal touch some of these students were looking for when they came up with the 18 nominated individuals in January.

"I want to see someone really passionate about it; some on-air personalities are really into it," said CCNN Live Executive Producer Joseph Piscitelli, a 17-year-old senior. "You can tell they love what they do." For this category, the student is looking for "someone that is not just posting breaking news but maybe puts some twists into their things."

The Columbus student body will vote on the winners using Google Forums on April 1. The winners will be announced at the live event, which doubles as a fundraiser to help send CCNN students to competitions. These trips can cost up to \$25,000 for out-of-state competitions when factoring in transportation and housing costs.

"These students are the future, and there's no doubt these high schoolers will go on to become the next generation of storytellers and pursuers of the truth," said WSVN-7 reporter Kevin Ozbek, a nominee in the Social Media category along with Roldan and NBC 6's Adam Kuperstein.

"Ten years from now they'll be the ones uncovering corruption and will be on the front line of breaking news. They'll be the ones we turn to, to get information," Ozbek said. "I have never seen a high school hold an awards ceremony like this. It just speaks to how innovative and creative the students and faculty are at Columbus High School."

The CCNN club was founded 20 years ago by teacher Sal Canella to communicate school news to students and faculty. Canella will be honored at the Media Excellence Awards. The program he initiated was revamped seven years ago by moderators Omar Delgado and Christina Hidalgo into CCNN Live, a fully functional news network.

"Since sports is so big at Columbus I decided to build CCNN Live through the sports program and figured it would spill into everything else," Delgado said. "I decided to cover the football program like it's never been covered and had a reporter on the sideline tweeting out everything that was happening. Our Twitter followers skyrocketed. We broadcast color commentaries with multiple cameras for every single football, basketball and baseball game. We have sideline reporters, satellite reports."

CBS4 sports reporter Kim Bokamper, a Miami Dolphins defensive end from 1977 to 1985, scored a nomination in the Sports Reporter category, where he is pitted against NBC 6's Joe Rose and ABC-Channel 10's Will Manso.

Bokamper was delighted to be recognized by Columbus. "It's a surprise to me that those in that age group would recognize a person of my age, whose days of being relevant to that age group are long gone. Now I feel a little younger," quipped Bokamper, 59. "The future of our business will be in good hands with students . . . preparing so diligently for their future in the television news business."

The "everything else" Delgado spoke of includes entertainment reports and local news, which included a recent interview with the parents of Winter Olympics speed skater Eddy Alvarez, 24, a Columbus grad who won a silver medal at Sochi as part of a U.S. relay team.

As entertainment reporter and co-vice president of CCNN Live, senior Joseph Cacioppo, 17, interviewed cast members of *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn* and *Kung Fu Panda II* at movie press junkets in Miami. Joseph hopes to use the discipline he learned at college, where he plans to study engineering.

CCNN Live has grown from about a dozen junior and senior journalism students at its revamping to 60 today, including freshmen, Hidalgo said.

Competitions are held throughout Florida and outside the state and are demanding. A national competition consists of a 16-hour day with a 6 a.m. wake-up call. Competitors are given 16 words and must pick one of them. "Within that 16-hour period, they have to create a whole show: interviews, graphics, commercials, public service announcements, all around that one word," Delgado said. "It's very difficult."

Senior Andrew Briz, 18, won best anchor in the state in April 2013. The pressure, and the long hours required to put together a viable news product, appeal to the teen, who envisions a career in psychology or communications.

"I'm definitely a stress-a-holic," Briz said. "If I go too long with no competitions, or too much downtime, my mind works on overdrive. I work well under stress." CCNN Live, he says, "definitely shaped who I am today."

Columbus Principal Brother Michael Brady feels CCNN Live's ambitious reach, as well as the discipline required by the students to maintain their grades to remain eligible for the extracurricular activity, bodes well for students' post-high school lives.

"This is a technological age, and media is certainly at the very top. This is a great educational tool and will be helpful to them when they go on to college and when they go on to their professional lives," Brady said. "Discipline, goal-setting and time-management are all a part of the academic and technological side of Columbus' news network."

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