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Thankful for the Brave and Noble

BY JACK NEWFIELD

This is my annual Thanksgiving column in appreciation of some people who use their talents to help others, to spread joy, and to demonstrate courage and class in everyday ways.

Tony Bennett. He proves that good guys do finish first.

Many great American novelists, such as Fitzgerald and Hemingway, peaked and burned out by 40. Others have remained vigorous and fresh into their 50s. But Philip Roth has had a rebirth in his 60s and now his 70s, publishing three exquisite novels over the last decade. The private Mr. Roth works, thinks, writes - and ignores the fame game.

He should have won the National Book Award this year for "The Plot Against America," but wasn't even nominated. He was a victim of political correctness and literary logrolling. But anyone who cares about literature knows Philip Roth is a giant who is having one glorious sunset.

Jamie Foxx. He is Ray Charles in "Ray." You see him "drown in his own tears." Call the cops if he doesn't win the Academy Award for best actor.

Timesman Dan Barry. For his breathtaking memoir, "Pull Me Up," and his columns, which always seem to find hope and the human spirit in a neglected place.

I know Curt Schilling campaigned for President Bush. But consider what he did against the Yankees in the American League Championship Series: pitching unhittable ball with his right sock soaked with blood and his body filled with painkillers. The blood oozed from a loose tendon that had been sutured just before the game, to give him leverage on the mound.

Courage, wherever it is put on display, whether in a ballpark or on a battlefield, must be venerated.

Attorney General Eliot Spitzer keeps locking up the miscreants of Wall Street - crooked analysts and brokers, hedge funds, and insurance brokers. He is the avenging lawman for the small investor and the middle class. And have you noticed he handcuffs no innocents and makes no mistakes? Every indictment or civil suit has instant credibility.

There was a sea shift in Albany this November, with the Democrats gaining three and possibly four seats in the Senate, making it a competitive chamber.

The unsung secret weapon behind this was a 26-year-old NYU law student, Jonathan Rosen, an old-fashioned grassroots organizer.

Mr. Rosen ran Jose Serrano's winning campaign (82%) against a 26-year incumbent. Then he moved into a Westchester motel and helped guide Andrea Stewart-Cousins's campaign against Nick Spano. The votes are still being recounted, but local pols think absentee ballots will enable the challenger to pull off the upset.

Five more Jonathan Rosens and the Democrats will take back the Senate in 2006 and enact a law to raise the minimum wage, which is what is driving Mr. Rosen.

The Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone is making progress under the leadership of Kenneth Knuckles, 57, a lawyer and architect.

UMEZ is not a social-services program. It is a city, state, and federally financed investment initiative to create jobs and make grants to small business and retail projects.

Mr. Knuckles has de-designated a dozen bad loans and projects that he inherited, and he has brought in a first-rate staff of bankers and managers. He has already created about 2,000 jobs and developed an investment strategy for the next five years.

Mr. Knuckles is also vice chairman of the City Planning Commission.

The City University is coming back in terms of grades, population, morale, and outside funds. The credit belongs to Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, the first CUNY graduate to become chancellor. He is the guiding force behind a new CUNY graduate school in journalism, likely to open in 2006. He is the best chancellor I have seen in 25 years. And he has helped select just the right presidents for the member colleges.

And the right vice chancellor is Jay Hershenson, also a CUNY graduate. Mr. Hershenson fills the potholes of higher education, such as Albany lobbying and public relations. The naming of two CUNY students as Rhodes Scholars this weekend shows just how far the university has come.

Let me close on a personal note. The old-fashioned doctor who responds with empathy to every phone call is supposed to be a relic of memory. But in this honor roll I must include my own internist at Beth Israel Hospital, Dr. Harry Fischer.

During my cancer treatment, he has done more than I ever would have imagined: returning calls on weekends, mobilizing and navigating the medical bureaucracy for me, and applying his sixth-sense diagnostic skills on my behalf.