



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pete Harckham

## Sen. Harckham Presents Outstanding Athlete Award to Valhalla's David Bernardini

PETE HARCKHAM May 6, 2022

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*Valhalla, NY* – New York State Senator Pete Harckham presented the inaugural Outstanding Student Athlete Award from Senate District 40 to David Bernardini, a junior at Valhalla High School and a member of the Boys' Varsity Soccer team. A founding member of the school's first active Peer Leadership Club, he is now an officer in the Valhalla CODA (Co-Occurring Disorder in Adolescence) Club.

“David is a true leader on and off the playing field,” said Harckham. “His efforts in communicating the need for mental health awareness and sharing important resources with his fellow students at Valhalla High School have had a tremendous impact. I am proud to recognize his remarkable achievements.”

As an officer of the Valhalla CODA Club, Bernardini has worked to ensure that his peers and the larger Valhalla community are engaged in activities that raise awareness of CODA, whether virtual, hybrid, or in-person. He has built a sense of connection centered around the importance of mental health, the dangers of substance misuse, and a theme of overall wellness by creating community wide challenges online and maintaining a highly visible presence on social media.

Thanks in part to Bernardini’s efforts as a freshman Valhalla High School started its first active Peer Leadership Club, which later became an official CODA club in April 2020. This part year, Bernardini persuaded his teammates on the high school boys’ soccer team to dedicate its season to CODA, and helped create special warm-up jerseys in this regard and shared CODA-specific messaging with opposing teams and spectators.

In addition to his athletics and CODA advocacy, Bernardini is active in the Valhalla International Fund, the high school newspaper, the high school environmental club and Valhalla Helping Hands, a community organization. During the summer, he works at a local ice cream shop.

“I am honored that Senator Harckham has chosen David to be the first recipient of his Outstanding Student Athlete Award,” said Stephanie Marquesano, founder of the Harris project, a Westchester-based nonprofit that sponsors CODA clubs in some of the area high schools. “Our organization relies on youth voices to empower young people to better understand the relationship between their mental health and substance

misuse/addiction. David is leading his generation in talking about what is often an uncomfortable topic while breaking down the doors leading to open dialogue.”

Marquesano added, “It is so important that young people know how common mental health disorders are, and that without accessing appropriate treatment they may begin to self-medicate. Experimentation with substances as such can cause brain changes leading to the development of certain mental health disorders and other negative consequences.”

Joining Harckham and Marquesano at Bernardini’s award ceremony at Valhalla High School were Valhalla School District Superintendent Kevin McLeod, Valhalla High School Principal Jon Hirsch, and special education teacher Stacey Gagliardi, one of the district’s CODA program administrators.

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, the term co-occurring disorders (COD) refers to a diagnosis of one or more mental health disorders plus substance (drug and/or alcohol) misuse and/or addiction.

The Outstanding Student Athletes Awards program recognizes student athletes throughout State Senate districts who exemplify sportsmanship, leadership, community service, academic excellence and athletic ability. Eligible students include current middle and high school students who play sports for any school, club or travel league within the district, and nominations come from community leaders.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to represent CODA and to help other people manage their lives in a healthy manner,” said Bernardini. “It is my hope to continue dedicating my life to making a difference in the world.”