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Aman Khaja Receives Brooklyn's Brightest Star Award

Who's the Brightest Star from Brooklyn – singer Barry Manilow? Playwright Arthur Miller? Actress Mary Tyler Moore? Guess again — this year's Brightest Star is Aman Khaja of Stuyvesant Heights, who was recognized at the Second Annual Brightest Star Gala for his outstanding achievements in citizenship.

The Brightest Star Gala, which honors individuals with developmental disabilities age 18 and older, was held on Saturday, January 29 at Block Institute, dedicated to improving the quality of life for those with developmental disabilities and their families.

This year's gala featured a special performance by touring band FLAME and was judged by a panel of celebrity judges. Beauty pageant notables were also present and helped coach each individual finalist in preparation for the event.

FLAME is comprised of 11 individuals with developmental disabilities, including autism, Down's syndrome, mental retardation and blindness. The inspirational group prides itself on changing the way the general public view people with disabilities.

The panel of judges included: Miss New York 2010 Claire Buffie, an outspoken advocate of human rights; Marine Park, Brooklyn-native Mo' Bounce, a DJ on Z100 radio in New York; Joanne Fowler, a senior writer at "People" magazine where she currently covers human interest stories for the magazine's "Heroes Among Us" column; and Kimberly Thomas, former pageant director in the Miss America Organization.

"Selecting one Brightest Star was not a simple task," said Mo' Bounce, Z100 DJ. "Each of the finalists had such a remarkable story, picking just one was an incredibly difficult decision. Aman really proved that he serves as an inspiration and mentor to others, especially in the Block Institute community."

"The Second Annual Brightest Star Gala gives us the opportunity to showcase the capabilities of individuals in our programs and remind others that each person has special talents and qualities that help to make our world a better place," said Dr. Scott Barkin, executive director of Block Institute.

The ten finalists who competed on Saturday were announced on October 24, and had been preparing for this night with the help of volunteer coaches who were former community pageant contestants or winners. The coaches helped each finalist produce a two-minute video that was shown at the gala, prepare an on-stage performance, select formal wear and get dressed for the event.

Shuly Wigs, a salon in Brooklyn on the forefront of hair and makeup trends, hosted the lady finalists on the Wednesday prior to the event for a beauty tutorial. The five female contestants were given makeup advice and tips, and also hairstyle suggestions. Classie Tuxedos, also of Brooklyn, provided tuxedos for the male contestants.

In addition to the overall Brightest Star winner, Aman Khaja, the following finalists were recognized for outstanding achievements in their respective categories:

- Barry Hellman of Dyker Heights, Spirit
- Helene Bekoff of Bayridge, Independence
- Helene Benton of Mapleton, Fellowship
- Isreal Lax of Williamsburg, Leadership
- Lois Koegan of Bay Ridge, Mastery
- Nahjah Ashe of Fort Hamilton, Growth
- Philip Pabon of Cypress Hill, Talent
- Robert Maldari of Marine Park, Wellness
- Sundry Melansun of Bensonhurst, Community