

# LOCAL

## City couple to receive honorary degrees for contributions to community, Wesleyan

By JENNIFER SPRAGUE  
PRESS STAFF

MIDDLETOWN — Modest about their achievements and the honor, Middletown couple Jennifer Alexander and Mark Masselli try to downplay the news that they will receive honorary degrees Sunday at Wesleyan University's 177th commencement.

"My peers from Wesleyan are all over the world doing extraordinary things," said Alexander, who graduated from Wesleyan in 1988. "They all deserve honorary degrees."

Selected for their support of the Middletown and Wesleyan communities, Masselli and Alexander's impact can be seen all over the city. Masselli is the founder, president and CEO of

"There's something about this community. It's such a real place. I love the diversity. I love the interplay of generations."

**JENNIFER ALEXANDER**  
Founder, executive director of Kidcity Children's Museum

Community Health Center Inc., Connecticut's largest provider of primary health care services for the uninsured and underinsured. He founded the health center when he was just 19 years old, and it now employs 500 people and provides services to more than 70,000 people a year in 11 cities and 140 schools.

Alexander is the founder and executive director of Kidcity Children's Museum, which draws 100,000 visitors a year.

Alexander, a New Jersey native, said she fell in love with Middletown when she attended Wesleyan University — and she never left.

"I think it's exciting when people stay," she said. "I see Middletown as a place both where Wesleyan lives and a place that's worth living in."

Growing up outside New York City, "everything fun happened after you got on a bus," she said.

"There's something about this community," she said. "It's such a real place. I love the diversity. I love the interplay of generations."

Masselli grew up in Middletown and attended Xavier High School. His father and uncle attended Wesleyan and worked at the school as chemists.

"I grew up with a foot in the Wesleyan community and a foot in the Middletown community," he said.

The couple, together 22 years with four children, have been involved in a number of organizations that benefit both Middletown and Wesleyan.

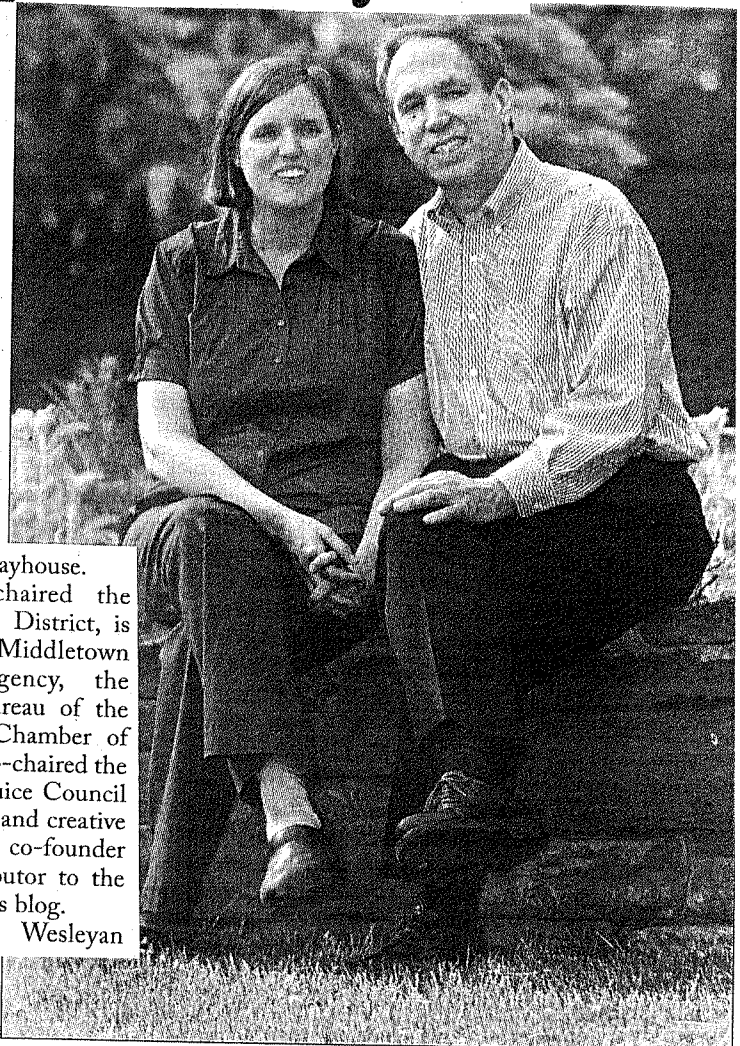
"Mark and I are drawn to anything that contributes to the vitality of this community," Alexander said. "That results in a lot of partnerships with the university, with artists, with businesspeople."

Masselli is the founding member of many community service initiatives in Middletown, including New Horizons Battered Women's Shelter, Nehemiah Housing Corporation and

Oddfellows Youth Playhouse.

Alexander has chaired the Downtown Business District, is a member of the Middletown Redevelopment Agency, the Central Business Bureau of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce and has co-chaired the chamber's Creative Juice Council for people in the arts and creative industries. She is also co-founder and a regular contributor to the Middletown Eye news blog.

She founded the Wesleyan



Catherine Avalone | The Middletown Press  
**Jen Alexander and Mark Masselli at their home in Middletown. The couple will receive honorary degrees from Wesleyan University at the school's graduation on Sunday.**

Club of Middletown and served as its co-chairwoman and chairwoman. She has also participated in many Career Resource Center panels in the role of entrepreneur, served on the Wesleyan University Bookstore Advisory Committee and was a member of Wesleyan's 175th Anniversary Committee. In 2003, she was honored with the Wesleyan University Service Award.

One of the couple's first projects together was the herb garden at the corner of Main and Green streets.

It was an overgrown vacant lot full of abandoned cars, and "Mark had this audacious idea to say to the city, 'I am going to put a formal herb garden on this site,'" Alexander said.

She did the design, and the garden is now maintained by the Community Health Center.

"For me, the essence of a Wesleyan education is visualizing the world you want to see — and then it's your responsibility to go and make that happen," she said.

Masselli and Alexander say they were overwhelmed to learn they would be receiving the degrees Sunday — and he was rendered speechless — but the credit, they say, should go to their mentors and the community leaders who came before them.

"Our recognition is because we stand on their shoulders," Masselli said. "It was handed down to us and we will hopefully be handing it down to another generation who is excited about the world and sees it through the prism of Middletown."

Also receiving honorary degrees are Azim Premji, chairman of Indian technology company Wipro Limited, and award-winning author Anna Quindlen, who will deliver the commencement address.

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