

By ERIC AVEDISSIAN Sentinel staff | Posted: Wednesday, November 15, 2017 10:11 am

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — Former Vice President Joe Biden honored his friend and colleague, Ambassador William J. Hughes, for his achievements and public service.

Hughes received a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award on Nov. 9 from Stockton University's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club.

Named after Hughes, an Ocean City resident, the center was founded in 2008 and provides public opinion polling and policy research, and sponsors a public lecture series and candidate debates.

Before Biden served as the 47th vice president of the United States from 2009 to 2017, he represented Delaware for 36 years in the U.S. Senate.

Biden recalled how, during those early days in the Senate, he struck up a friendship with Hughes, who served in Congress from 1975 to 1995. The two would often ride the train to Washington, D.C., together.

"We'd get on that train and ride down together and ride back together and ride back to D.C. You can do a lot of business on that commute. A lot of the time Bill and I spent talking about our families," Biden said.

Biden served as chairman on the Senate Judiciary Committee while Hughes chaired the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime. The two Democrats worked together on various crime-prevention legislation, Biden said, including an assault weapons ban and a ban on Teflon-coated bullets, which can penetrate ballistic vests.

"There's no doubt in my mind, Bill, that the work you did driving those efforts has actually saved lives," Biden told Hughes.

“What’s broken now is the political system. The political system is broken in a way that has to be fixed,” Biden said, explaining when he started serving in the Senate, politicians respected each other even though they disagreed on certain issues. “Today it’s different. Ask your colleagues who serve in Congress. Do they really know anybody on the other side?”

Although it was common to see Democrats and Republicans eating together in the Senate dining room in the Capitol, now representatives eat lunch in their offices, Biden said.

“When you get to know someone it’s hard to dislike them. It’s hard to view them as the enemy or the opposition,” Biden said. “Those hours on the train with Bill were precious precisely because we spent so much time learning about one another, talking about things that mattered to us. That used to be a standard, to build relationships with folks with whom you disagree.”

Hughes thanked Biden and said he “inspired and befriended” him during his early career.

“History will judge you as one of America’s great leaders and statesmen. We miss you,” Hughes said to Biden. “You sound more and more presidential.”

Hughes said Congress has “weakened” background checks for weapons while the assault weapons ban was lifted.

“It is enough to make one want to run again for Congress,” Hughes joked.

Hughes successfully advocated for the creation of the South Jersey Economic Development District and pushed for the creation of the FAA Technical Center, the nation’s premier aeronautics and aviation research, test and evaluation center in the district. The center was renamed the William J. Hughes Technical Center in 1996.

Former President Bill Clinton named Hughes the U.S. Ambassador to Panama in 1995. While ambassador, Hughes oversaw the transition of the Panama Canal to Panamanian control.

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy has “made a difference” by focusing on public policy in the state and region, Hughes said.

“I view my almost 50 years of public service as truly a labor of love, just like Joe Biden,” Hughes said. “I have loved every bit of the work I’ve done over these years.”

State Senate President Stephen Sweeney presented former state Sen. Diane Allen with an Excellence in Civic Engagement Award. Allen, a Republican who began her career as a reporter and news anchor for KYW-TV in Philadelphia, was elected to the Assembly from the 7th District in 1995. In 1997, she was elected to the state Senate.

Former state Sen. Jim Whelan also received an Excellence in Civic Engagement Award. Whelan, who served as mayor of Atlantic City and in the state Assembly and Senate, died in August.

Dr. Brigid Callahan Harrison, professor of political science and law at Montclair State University, received a Distinctive Alumni Leadership Award.

Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, who represents New Jersey's 12th District, received the Civility in Government & Politics Award.

Maryam Sarhan, a 2017 Stockton University graduate and former Student Senate president, was awarded the Distinctive & pres²