Retired State Police trooper who died of COVID lived a 'phenomenal life'
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New Jersey leaders honored a retired trooper Tuesday who recently died with the coronavirus.

James Bryan, 53, died on New Year's Eve after more than two decades with the State Police.

"I thank Jim for his 25 years of service to the people of our state and for living up to the highest ideals of our Troopers," Gov. Phil Murphy said during a press conference in Trenton.

Bryan was a "phenomenal trooper" who led a "phenomenal life," said Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police.

Bryan was also a champion arm wrestler who recently benched a personal-best 500 pounds, according to the governor's office. Both Murphy and Bryan's family stressed that Bryan died despite excellent health.

"This disease is not just happening to the elderly," Bryan's wife, Brenda, told CBS Philly. "It's happening to the fittest."

Bryan was from Burlington County and graduated from Rancocas Valley Regional High School in 1985, according to Murphy's office.

He joined the State Police two years later. During his tenure he managed the Private Detectives Unit, created a certification program for security guards now used statewide and finished as a lieutenant, officials said.

Bryan was also the American Armsport Association's Armwrestler of the Year in 2006. He won world championship matches in 2005 with both his left and right hands, officials said.

Callahan said he did beat Bryan once — by using two hands.

Bryan earned an associate's degree from Burlington County College and a bachelor's in criminal justice from Fairleigh Dickinson University, according to his LinkedIn.

He and his wife were married for 27 years, and they have two daughters, Kalyn, 24, and Casee, 20, officials said.

Before Bryan got sick, the couple had planned on moving from their Southampton Township home to open a wedding venue business, Brenda Bryan told CBS.