



Preparing students for

life beyond the classroom

FOCUS ON PHOENIX

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



I hope you all enjoyed the holiday season with family and friends and that you are off to a great start in 2019! Whether you are a friend, family member, colleague, sponsor, or donor—you are all part of The Phoenix Center family.

Like families, we always support one another, we celebrate our wins and create timeless memories together. It is along these lines that we decided that this newsletter issue, on the heels of the holiday season, and in time for the beginning of a new year, should be themed, "The Art & Beauty of Giving." It is my pleasure to share with you several stories exemplifying this theme on and around the impact of "giving" for your reading pleasure. As always, I thank you for your support and dedication. I hope you enjoy this issue of giving, family and partnership. Until next time, please be well, be happy and stay connected.

With gratitude,
Julie Mower, M.A.Ed.
Executive Director

The mission of The Phoenix Center, working in partnership with families and community, is to develop the potential of each student with developmental disabilities and those on the autism spectrum ages five through 21 and to provide customized, unique, and individualized programs aligned with the New Jersey Student Learning Standards. Promoting the development of the whole student, we care for, educate, and empower our students and graduates so that they will develop life-centered skills which will prepare them for life beyond the classroom.



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: KAREN P.

Earlier this year we were fortunate enough to have an opportunity to speak with one of our longtime students, Karen, a vivacious and eloquent student from Room 209 with her teacher, Stephanie. We asked her about her acceptance to community college, what she likes most about being a student at The Phoenix Center and much in between. Here's what she had to say.

Tell me about yourself:

My name is Karen P. I am 21, and I have been at The Phoenix Center probably about 14 years now.

What's your favorite subject?

My favorite subject is English.

Why do you like it?

Because I grew to like it, and I find it to be easier than other subjects. It's also because I found it to be interesting at the age of 14, as I discovered comics, and later on I moved from comics to novels and began to read fanfics. I'm currently working on my own novel now. It's about an apocalyptic world...and supernatural powers...demons...and the family of a demon king.

Do you have a favorite school activity?

I think my favorite school activity is Media. Because I started using computers at the age of 9 or 10, I found it to be

the one thing I liked the most. Since I was young, I always used the classroom's computer or liked using the Media Center's computers.

Do you have a role model?

My role model is JK Rowling. Even though I'm not a big fan of her works, just the fact that she worked really hard to get to where she is now, inspires me to work harder on my own literary work. I think that if I work just as hard as she did, that one day I'll be a famous writer, or even better. How she lost her mother, how she didn't have any money, then eventually she becomes a publisher...her persistence as a writer.

What do you like best about The Phoenix Center?

I think the best part is when I am with my friends, teachers and therapists. I've been with some of them almost 14 years now. Since I'm going to graduate from The Phoenix Center this year, I definitely will miss this school. I feel bittersweet. Sometimes you have to spread your wings and fly. I also value the relationships I developed these past few years, with students and staff.

What are your plans after graduation?

I passed my placement test at Passaic Community College, and am currently enrolled in an English class. I am also working at Walgreen's.

What's your favorite time of the year?

I don't have a true favorite but I enjoy spring and summer.

What's your favorite food?

I would have to say I really enjoy pizza.

What do you want to be or do when you are older?

I thought I wanted to be a person who studies dinosaurs, then I realized that writing was my gift, I now want to be an author. I daydream a lot so that builds your imagination which is great for an author.

Do you have a favorite TV show?

Actually I watch Japanese cartoons but my favorite is *Game of Thrones*...

Tell me about a recent thing you did that helped others/ was charitable?

The Holiday Toy Drive during December was what I participated in. Families were asked to donate a new toy, and we brought the toys to Toys for Tots, and Nutley's toy drive. I volunteered to help deliver the toys. I felt glad because growing up I didn't get many toys myself, it's nice especially for families that are also low income, like me with my mom. They will have memories of those toys and the joy that brings.

Thank you Karen! We look forward to reading your book(s)! ■

THE HOLIDAYS AT THE PHOENIX CENTER

This year, December was filled with holiday activities that kept us very busy! We held our annual holiday concert, a student toy drive, a school food drive, a corporate toy drive, and a visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus. The Phoenix Center's Co-founder and former Executive Director, Dr. Geraldine Gibbia, was Mrs. Claus, as husband Kevin Gaynor played Santa and regaled students in every classroom with their singing and musical performances. ■

Photos from left to right: Co-Founder and former Executive Director, Dr. Geraldine Gibbia played Mrs. Claus (and the guitar!) along with husband Kevin Gaynor as Santa!; Principal Katie Passarotti and Louis from Room 204; from Room 106, student Josh, accompanied by teachers Ashley Agresti and Michelle Radosti.



The Phoenix Center Holiday Family—Santa, Mrs. Claus, the elves, helpers, friends and family!



Gail Stocks with husband, Ian.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: GAIL STOCKS

1. What got you into special education?

What *got me* into special education was a series of fortunate events with mentors and exceptional staff and students I met along the way in the various schools in which I worked. What *kept me* working in special education was more personal; a young adult very close to my family who had a childhood of challenges from having ADHD and issues which would later be recognized as ASD features, is now a graduate of a top university and now in a top position at a start up in Manhattan, living on their own, engaged in meaningful relationships. Through our relationship with this person, we came to know firsthand how a supportive family, and an environment of acceptance and love can contribute toward a child's emotional stability, personal growth, independence, and success. I need to bring this realistic optimism to parents of children with special needs.

I began at the Kennedy Center in the Bronx, and then moved to NJ, where I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Gibbia and get hired by her at TPC in West Paterson. I then moved with them to their next location in Little Falls. In 1999, I resigned to work in the public school in my town, as my own children had just reached school age and I wanted to be closer to home and on the same schedule as they were. Since then, I worked at the Stepping Stones School and New Beginnings. Once my children were old enough for me to feel more comfortable traveling further to work, I was lucky to find so many old friends at The Phoenix Center who remembered me and were so welcoming in re-hiring me in 2011! I've been here ever since.

2. What separates The Phoenix Center from others that support and nourish students with special needs?

The dedication of the staff is evident in our longevity at TPC and commitment to our students. I began in 1994 working alongside Julie Mower when she was an art teacher; she has been promoted and is now our wonderful Executive Director! It is evident that everyone here values the employees' professional growth! The participation of our staff alongside the families in so many events such as picnics, family nights out, sporting events, races and fund raisers is extraordinary. Ensuring our curriculum will enable our students have continued success upon graduation is our critical difference and focus. We are committed to continuing education as well as educating others. I personally created original and well-received presentations for two years in a row at ASAH on the topic of extracurricular activities with students in special needs schools.

3. Do you have a favorite school tradition or activity?

I adore participating in Family Restaurant Night. This was new when I returned to the school in 2011, and I have seen firsthand how this has changed family's lives. I have specific students, who had been unable to have a meal with their family in a restaurant. Given that these families often do not have the support system to get a babysitter, this then prevents the parents and siblings from having a typical night out. This program gives the families the opportunity for a night in a restaurant they enjoy, amongst their Phoenix friends, with no judgments and with the support they need if their sensory or behavioral issues arise. This enables the parents to relax and feel comfortable, the siblings to enjoy a family dinner, and the student to feel less pressure to "behave" and more comfort knowing they are with "family." Two of my students in particular have grown so much since this program began, and the families are now able to go out to other restaurants without this support. This TPC program directly improved the quality of life for these families.

4. Is there an accomplishment you're particularly proud of during your time at TPC?

Firstly, I was instrumental in creating the plan, obtaining a \$15,000 Seton Hall University grant, and setting up training for a multi-sensory environment. It is now a state-of-the-art space helping our students to regulate themselves and enable them to achieve a calm state of alertness and improved sensory regulation. Multi-sensory environments have been shown to help individuals with autism, developmental disabilities, and challenging behaviors.

Secondly, I initiated a Comedy Club in the summer of 2013. Each year, new students request to join. Students have since performed every year in the school concert for the families, as well as held their own small performance for their peers of original improvisational material. I am currently looking into performances outside the school such as at local nursing homes. The multi-disciplinary approach in co-working

with the school psychologist, speech-language pathologists and other OT's, has helped the students work on many goals while participating in the comedy club.

I found that utilizing the students' natural interest in humor has facilitated social integration within their peer groups. This club has helped students learn to "lighten up" when they face a problem. The comedy they engaged in is used as a mechanism for social development and communication within the group.

5. After graduating, what do you hope your students take away from TPC?

Life skills, life skills, life skills. I am currently working with TPC on the development of their 18-21 year old program. In keeping with the goal of preparing our students for life beyond The Phoenix Center, I work closely to ensure that they achieve their maximal potential in executive functioning. I have visited several over-21 programs to ensure that the goals we address with our students at TPC will be consistent with what they need to achieve success upon graduation.

6. How are parents integrated into the culture and education at TPC?

I have volunteered for "Family Night Out" where the parents bring their children back to the school in the evening for either dinner with other families, or drop them off so the parents can have a night out and the kids have an evening with their peers. Discussion and support groups are created by the counseling department for the families. But I think the feeling of community for the parents as they have dinner with other families is equally as important. Additionally, the parents have a group called "Partners in Caring" where they get together and create holiday shopping for the students and fund multiple assemblies throughout the school year.

Thank you Gail for your obvious subject-matter expertise, dedication and enthusiasm. We are lucky to have you! ■



THANK YOU TRADEWEB AND IAN STOCKS!

Ian Stocks, a Managing Director of Tradeweb (with locations in NYC and Jersey City), is a longtime supporter of our students. When Tradeweb first established their philanthropy committee some years ago, The Phoenix Center was selected as a beneficiary. TPC appealed on so many fronts: not only because of the work we do, but how directly Tradeweb can positively impact our students. Each year, Tradeweb participates in the holiday gift giving program, with members of its staff directly purchasing wish-list items for our students. Thank you to Gail and to Ian for all of your support! Your impact goes beyond words!! ■

Pictured above: Solangie Connolly, TPC staff Jonathan Andolino and Jose Granados, along with Ian Stocks.

OUR STUDENTS GIVE BACK

Take a look at our students, organizing and executing a toy and food drive to benefit others! A special shout out to teacher Tom Reynolds (from Room 204) and his class for spearheading a much needed toy drive for a local charity. Another special thank you goes to Occupational Therapist Gershon Kravetz for establishing a food drive to support St. Mary's food pantry. Under Gershon's leadership, The Phoenix Center family collected non-perishables, and the students of the Manta Ray Unit helped deliver the items donated—together, many hands make light work! ■





THANK YOU UBS!

For several years now, beginning in 2015, financial services giant UBS has held a Toy Drive to benefit The Phoenix Center. We spoke with Samontha Forbes who works on the investment banking side on a trading desk about their involvement. "We have a large emphasis on philanthropy and charitable giving in this area of the firm—including lots of toy drives. I started in 2017 and began to head our support of the Holiday Toy Drive. It is a pleasure to be involved in this. The way it works is that we contact TPC right after Thanksgiving, we create a 'give back tree' for holiday donations; we get a list of names of the children and people pick a name with the 'suggested gifts' that are on the tree or they have the option of donating directly to The Phoenix Center. We had 56 tags, (or gifts), this year! This process actually helps me shop for my children, because it gives me ideas and insights on what kids really want. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute as we are getting something out of it as well. People love it so much...I had three people who were out of town call me to ask me to grab a name for them from the tree!"

Thank you Samontha...Brett...and the whole team at UBS for your continued generosity and support! ■



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SAVE THE DATE
CASINO NIGHT FUNRAISER Friday, May 3, 2019