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Inside this issue:

Student Spotlight	1
A letter from the Executive Director	2
Family Outreach Programs	3
Fundraising / Development	4

All of our students have abilities and disabilities and we will discover and focus on their abilities **NOT** their disabilities.

Focus on Phoenix

The Phoenix Center is a private nonprofit school committed to offering a well-integrated program focusing on the development and education of the whole child and his/her family. Our team approach provides diversified programming with the emphasis on student independence, social-emotional growth, career development and integrated employment opportunities. The Phoenix Center's primary goal is to assist students five to 21 years of age in developing skills which will maximize their adaptation to everyday life.

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Student Spotlight

The Phoenix Center is proud to introduce another shining star: Paul P. who is 17 years old and has been a student at The Phoenix Center for three years.



Paul's story begins before he came to The Phoenix Center. His parents wanted a school that could better fit Paul's challenging issues – communication, cognitive abilities, physical limitations, and sensory needs. The previous placement he was in was not the ideal one. His parents came on a tour of The Phoenix Center and immediately knew this was the school for Paul. "I told my wife in the car that if I could dream up a place for Paul to go to school, The Phoenix Center was it" says Paul, Sr., Paul's father. He was amazed by the programs the school had as well as the well-trained staff to help his son. Since then, his son travels over 50 miles each way to get to The Phoenix Center every day, and is happy to do it.

Paul has made incredible strides since coming to The Phoenix Center. His teacher, Jennifer McQuade, recognized that Paul's biggest challenge was not being able to effectively communicate with his family, peers, and staff at The Phoenix Center. "Paul has always had great eye contact and people are and continue to be his biggest motivators. Every time I looked at Paul, I knew he had something to say." With this, Jennifer and his Speech and Language Specialist, Mali DeSantis, were able to collect data and work with Paul's home district to get Paul a new communication device that gave him the opportunity to communicate with eye gaze.

Paul's eye gaze device consists of a computer-like system, which tracks his eyes. "Paul participates in activities and lessons, strictly through the use of his eyes. Through cause-and-effect-type activities, Paul has begun to realize that he can communicate what he wants by looking at items on the screen. In only a few short months, Paul has increased his accuracy and independence in all of his programs" says McQuade. Currently, the device is only being used in school, but his parents are hopeful that they will be able to secure one for Paul to use in the home to communicate with them and his three sisters.

Communication is not the only area in which Paul is increasing his independence. Since coming to The Phoenix Center, Paul has been on a feeding program, which helped him learn how to hold and use a fork and spoon. Now, Paul can feed himself independently. Additionally, Paul was not toilet-trained when he came to The Phoenix Center. But in the three years that he has been here, Paul has transitioned from wearing a pull-up to now wearing underwear. "Paul remains on an adult-imposed toileting schedule; however, Paul has been working to initiate the bathroom using his eye gaze device," says McQuade.

Paul and his family have also benefited from additional services provided by The Phoenix Center. His family has attended Family Night Out, which is a night Phoenix Center Staff provide 'respite' service for students while parents and families can go out or benefit from informational sessions or parent and sibling support groups held at The Phoenix Center. Paul's parents and sisters attended the Fall Family Night Out. His parents were able to attend the CPR class provided by our CPR-certified Nurse, while his sisters attended the counseling group for our students' siblings. "It was great for my daughters to meet other kids and see how there are other kids their age with siblings who have special needs."

Paul's father credits The Phoenix Center staff for his son's success. "They really hire the best people to work there. His teacher Jennifer is great with Paul and so is his one-to-one instructional aide Sofia" says Paul, Sr. He added how impressed he was with the school when they advocated for his son's communication device. "They really worked hard to help my son obtain his communication device. Even Dr. Gibbia got involved to make sure Paul could be able to communicate."

Paul's father added that "Rome was not built in a day" and that his son's progress will continue to develop.



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Growth means
change and change
involves risk, step-
ping from the
known to the
unknown.

-George Shinn

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A Letter from the Executive Director

Greetings Dear Friends and Supporters of the Phoenix Center,

As 2012 begins, we *remember* 2011 with all of its accomplishments, we *celebrate* our current projects and activities and we *believe* in our future as we continue to prepare for NCASES Accreditation.

I am happy to report that our enrollment is strong and we continue to attract new school districts. Of the 143 students currently on our rolls, 77 (or 54%) have a classification of autistic. Given the recent articles in the [New York Times](#), [Bergen Record](#), and other papers, concerning the proposed changes in the diagnostic criteria of autism, I thought it would be timely to talk a bit about this issue.



The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is proposing new diagnostic criteria for the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) for autism. The D.S.M., as the manual is called, is the standard reference for mental disorders. It drives research and treatment, and it determines insurance decisions. According to the APA's January 20th Release No. 12-03, the DSM-5 expert panel *recommends a new category called autism spectrum disorder which would incorporate previously separate diagnoses including autism disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)*. The experts are proposing that the symptoms of these four disorders represent a continuum of severity rather than a yes or no diagnosis based on a specific disorder. Furthermore, the new criteria will describe the individual's overall developmental status in social communication and other cognitive and motor behaviors.

Comparing the criteria for autism diagnosis in the DSM 4 with the proposed criteria in the DSM 5 clearly indicates a narrowing of the eligibility criteria. (For specific information on the criteria, I refer our readers to www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=94) What does it all mean? Well, the experts are not sure. The APA states that their field testing *does not indicate there will be any change in the number of patients receiving care for autism spectrum disorders—there will just be more accurate diagnosis that can lead to more focused treatment*. Dr. Fred Volkmar, the Director of the Yale Child Study Center is also conducting field studies and his preliminary findings are suggesting that the proposed changes will affect only those previously on the spectrum who were the higher functioning. His hypothesis is that the change in criteria will have less of an impact of diagnosis of the more cognitively impaired individuals.

The final publication of the DSM-5 is planned for May 2013 which will culminate a 14-year revision process. Before then, several field testing projects will continue to examine the potential effects of the proposed criteria. With the narrowing of the criteria, it is obvious to me that the number of individuals classified with autism will decrease. I believe that the broad criteria used in the DSM-4 manual has played a significant role in the recent skyrocketing of classifications on the spectrum. Furthermore, with the rise in Applied Behavioral Analysis as a preferred method of treatment for many, lobbyists have been successful in allowing Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA's) to receive third party payments from insurance companies. So, a question may be, does it all come down to money? Is it becoming too expensive to treat individuals on the spectrum and, if so, by narrowing the criteria, there will be fewer to receive treatment? By making the criteria more stringent, only those with moderate to severe cognitive, social, behavioral patterns might be classified. This would exclude an entire group of individuals who, if they were classified, could receive early intervention services and perhaps the hope for a brighter future.

If you are a parent, relative or know an individual with autism, I urge you to stay informed of these proposed changes. Advocate for children and adults with autism. You can visit the APA at www.psych.org, www.psychiatryonline.org, and www.HealthyMinds.org. Also, contact **Autism New Jersey**, **Autism Speaks**, **Autism Now** and other advocacy groups.

At the Phoenix Center, we protect the rights and celebrate the gifts of all individuals with disabilities. I encourage all of you to do the same.

Dr. Geri Gibbia

Family Outreach Programs

At the Phoenix Center, we offer a wide variety of programs to meet the needs of our students and their families. These include Educational Workshops, Family and Sibling Support Groups, Family Night Out, Respite Care, Family Pasta Night, Family Bowling Night and Partners in Caring.

Family Night Out occurs several times a year. During this time, families can leave their Phoenix Center child with our highly qualified staff and go out for the evening. "It gives parents the opportunity to take a night off, and maybe go get dinner together, something that might not be so easy to do" says Anne Jens, school psychologist and coordinator for Family Night Out. A light homemade dinner is prepared for the students as well as fun activities and arts and crafts for them to participate in.



Phoenix Center Teacher Ciara Dagostino working with student David B. on an Arts and Crafts activity.



Phoenix Center Counselor and Supervisor, Katie Schoerner with student Tiffany O. at a Family Pasta Night held at The Center.

Parents may also opt to stay at the Center for a Parents' Support Group run by a Phoenix Center Counselor while their child is cared for by The Center's staff. "The support group has created opportunities for parents to meet other parents and bond with each other. During one group meeting, a parent stated that the group felt like family to her", says Jens.

Siblings of our students are also given the opportunity to participate in a Support Group. "We have had several siblings come and share their stories. It is a nice opportunity for them to meet other siblings and connect with others that are going through the same thing," says Jens. This group is also run by a Phoenix Center counselor and is held at the same time as the Parents' Support Group.

Recently, Family Night Out offered a CPR information and review class for parents in place of the support group for parents. There were over 20 parents who participated in the class held by our School Nurse and CPR Instructor, Connie Andolino. "Parents were provided with basic first aid and knowledge of life saving skills and after three hours of instruction, they left with more confidence on how to help their child in an emergency situation," says Andolino.

Additional family opportunities for our Phoenix Center families include Family Pasta Night, Family Bowling Night, and a Picnic in the Park. All these events give our students and families the opportunity for a night (or day) out with their families and the opportunity to meet other families. It also gives our students the opportunity to practice skills they learn in the classroom to community scenarios supported by our staff.



Phoenix Center student Steven S. with his father, Steven, at Family Bowling Night.

Our parents also give back to our students through our parent association, Partners in Caring. This association contributes to our students and staff through fundraising opportunities held several times a year. They also sponsor a Holiday Boutique in December to give students the opportunity to purchase gifts for their families. "The holiday boutique is a great opportunity for our students to generalize so many skills. They make a shopping list, budget the money they have, pick out items to purchase, and the pay for their purchases. It gives them a great real-life experience supported by our staff and parents" says Gina Marini, a teacher at The Center. Money from the fundraising events go to school wide assemblies for the students, as well as money towards a Valentine's Day Dance, Thanksgiving Day Feast, and the Staff Appreciation Luncheon held in May.



Students learned traditional African Dancing during an assembly organized by Partners in Caring.

Parent educational workshops are also offered monthly at The Center to our families. These workshops offer a wide range of opportunities for our parents to learn how to help their child. Some of these workshops include information about transition programs and life after 21, while others include information about effective behavior techniques that parents should try with their child. These workshops are another opportunity for our parents to meet each other and to learn how they can help their children outside The Phoenix Center as well as prepare for life after graduation.



Fundraising / Development

Annual Giving Campaign

It is still not too late to make a donation to The Phoenix Center's Annual Giving Campaign. Annual appeal requests were mailed in December and again late January. If you have not yet made your gift, we would greatly appreciate your support. You can mail your donation or log onto www.phoenixcenterinc.com and follow the *Donate* button to make your gift directly to our website.

Casino Night May 4th

Save the Date for another exciting Phoenix Center fundraising event. The always lively Casino Night will be held here at The Phoenix Center on Friday, evening May 4, 2012. Gaming Table and Slot Machine Sponsorships are available at the \$600, \$500 and \$300 levels. Individual tickets will be \$60 per person and invitations will be mailed in March. For information on sponsorships or to be placed on the Casino Night invitation mailing list, please email nrahaim@phoenixcenterinc.com.

All funds raised through the Annual Giving Campaign and Casino Night support The Phoenix Center's cutting-edge programs, therapies, activities and technology that are not covered by tuition dollars from its sending school districts.



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THE PHOENIX CENTER CURRENTLY SERVES STUDENTS FROM EIGHT COUNTIES IN THE FOLLOWING NEW JERSEY SCHOOL DISTRICTS: Belleville, Bloomfield, Bloomingdale, Butler, Carlstadt/East Rutherford, Cedar Grove, Clifton, Cresskill, East Orange, Elmwood Park, Fair Lawn, Glen Ridge, Hanover Park, Harrison, Hasbrouck Heights, Hawthorne, Hoboken, Irvington, Jersey City, Kearny, Kinnelon, Lakeland Regional, Leonia, Livingston, Lodi, Manchester Regional, Middletown, Millburn, Montclair, Morris Hills Regional, Morris School District, Newark, New Providence, North Arlington, North Bergen, Nutley, Park Ridge, Passaic, Passaic Valley Regional, Paterson, Pequannock Township, Perth Amboy, Pompton Lakes, Prospect Park, Ramapo/Indian Hills, Ramsey, Ridgefield, Ridgefield Park, Ridgewood, Rochelle Park, Rockaway Borough, Roselle, Roxbury, Secaucus, Springfield, Tenafly, Union City, Verona, Wayne, Westfield, West Orange, Westwood Regional, Woodcliff Lake