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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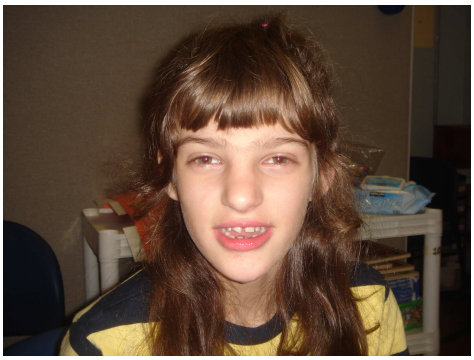
All of our students have abilities and disabilities and we will focus on their abilities rather than their disabilities.

Student Spotlight



Charlotte came to the Phoenix Center in 2008, when she was 12 years old and has made tremendous progress over the past two years at the Center. Her aggressive behaviors towards herself and others have drastically decreased and her time spent working and engaging in activities with her classmates has greatly increased.

When Charlotte first started at the Phoenix Center, she had difficulty communicating her wants and needs in a way that was appropriate and understandable for others. Charlotte would aggress towards others or cause harm to herself, especially when she was frustrated and unable to communicate her feelings. However, in these two short years, Charlotte has learned how to communicate and socialize appropriately with others. She is communicating yes or no, when she is finished, if she needs help, and if she does or does not want something. Charlotte is also working with a new augmentative communication device to help her communicate. It contains pictures of her friends and staff which helps her identify with whom she wants to communicate. Nicole Protomastro, one of Charlotte's teachers, states "Charlotte's socialization skills are fantastic, and she does great in group activities. She waits her turn to speak in group, and responds to peer and/or adult initiated greeting using her device." She is also forming relationships with people. Lynn Abelson, Charlotte's speech therapist, says "Charlotte has made so many warm connections with staff. She always stops people in the hall to say hello."

Charlotte has also made excellent progress in life skills. She is brushing her teeth with minimal assistance from The Phoenix Center staff and her mother Pearl. Charlotte has also been gaining an understanding of how to make the bed in the school's dorm room. She understands how the sheets and pillows should be arranged and loves to help her friends make the bed. Charlotte applies the skills she has learned to her home setting. Her mother, Pearl, now has a helper in the kitchen and sees Charlotte making her bed. "She loves helping me bake. We make brownies together and she will stir the mix for me." Additionally, Charlotte participates in a feeding therapy program at the Phoenix Center and has made gains using feeding skills such as using a fork, spoon, and drinking from a cup. Her mother, Pearl, sees how much progress she has made feeding herself at home. "Charlotte used to prefer me to feed her. Now she demands to feed herself. She does not want to be fed."

Charlotte also participates in the Therapeutic Horseback Riding program at the Phoenix Center. It was a huge success for her. Marc Restaino, the coordinator of the program adds that he is very proud of Charlotte's progress in the program. "Charlotte has done a fantastic job. She is sitting up straight when on the horse, smiling and following directions. She is very focused and is very proud of herself."

Charlotte's growth at the Phoenix Center and at home can be attributed to the on-going collaboration among her family, therapists, and teachers. Charlotte's mother, Pearl, is constantly involved with Charlotte's program and growth at the Phoenix Center. Nicole Protomastro, says "Charlotte's mom is incredibly supportive of her daughter and the class she is in. She has come in on numerous occasions to run planting groups with Charlotte and her classmates. She not only incorporates the academic aspect, but the sensory as well, which really engages Charlotte's class."

Nicole Protomastro adds that she is very proud of Charlotte. "She is a fantastic girl! Charlotte is so funny and has personality for miles! The progress she has made is absolutely incredible, and I am so proud of her." Her mother, Pearl, adds "I see a much happier kid. She is communicating more which is wonderful to see."

We are very proud of her and all that she has accomplished at The Phoenix Center.

A Message from the Executive Direc-

Phoenix flies into its Twentieth **Year!**

On July 5th, 2010, the first day of our Extended School Year, we started our twentieth anniversary year! So much has changed and so much has remained the same during the last nineteen years. Our address has changed three times from West Paterson to Little Falls to our true home in Nutley.

What has remained the same is the quality of our program (of course, it has become better with age) and the spirit and the passion of the Phoenix Center's staff. Several years ago, student interns from William Paterson University presented us with a plaque that read:

Take the innocence and trust of children,
blend in the courage and strength of parents,
sprinkle with the guidance of directors and the
love and determination of teachers…mix in the
therapists' talents, stir in the effort of aides,
simmer with love…Yield: A Caring Family.

I am proud to say that is still who the Phoenix Center is. An extended family of *161 caring individuals providing services to 144 wonderful students from 69 municipalities in ten counties.*

This June, we graduated eleven students. Additionally, we are happy to tell you that three other students will be leaving the Phoenix Center to attend less restrictive high school settings. These positive outcomes speak to the quality of our staff, their instruction, to the integrity our academic programs, and especially, to our students' hard work and determination.

Looking back over the 2009-2010 school year, some of the highlights include the expansion of our capability to provide Supported Employment and Community-Based Instruction. These two programs move teaching into the community and prepare our students for life beyond the Phoenix Center. We also introduced our new Horticulture Therapy Program and VOLT Fitness Program.

As the Phoenix Center enters its "20's", we are genuinely aware that we do not exist in isolation. We have thrived on collaborative relationships with many individuals and groups and consider them part of our family as well. They are our benefactors—individuals, corporate donors, and private foundations. Without their financial support, generosity and kindness, the Phoenix Center would not be what it is today. They are the professionals working at the County and State levels in the Department of Education who provide guidance and support. Without these local school districts' relationships, there would be no Phoenix Center. And last, but not least, there are the parents who have entrusted the Phoenix Center with their children.

All of our partners should be assured that we will continue to do our best to live out our mission to provide a well integrated program for our students and families with the ultimate goal of developing skills which will maximize our students adaptation to everyday life when s/he leaves the Phoenix Center.

Thank you all for being part of our dream. As we commence our twentieth year, we believe that we all rise by raising others. Let us continue on this beautiful journey together! Happy Summer!

Best Wishes,
Dr. Geri Gibbia

The Phoenix Center Administrative Staff

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Director Personnel / Staff Development

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Principal

Audrey Poggioli, M.A. Ed.
Assistant Principal
Curriculum and Instruction

"Receive the child in reverence; educate him with love; let him go forth in freedom."

Rudolf Steiner

The Phoenix Center Board of Directors

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Horticulture Therapy Program

One of our goals at The Phoenix Center is to involve our students in activities and inform them of issues that their peers and family members encounter as well. The environment is an important topic for all ages, and in order to keep our community as "green" as possible, we have introduced a Horticulture Therapy Program to The Phoenix Center.

In-kind contributions from GeeKay Landscaping, O'Malley Construction and grants from Columbia Bank Foundation, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, and the Ramsey Area Garden Club have allowed us to introduce our new Horticulture Therapy Program. The space between our two school buildings has been transformed into a beautiful outdoor classroom with a decked area with built-in flower boxes and herb garden. We have engaged the services of a certified Horticulture Therapist who, with our science teacher and classroom teachers, works with our students to bring core curriculum content areas to life.

Students displaying their plants to Columbia Bank President Ray Hallock.
Back Row (left to right): Ray Hallock, Mario C., Dr. Berrian.
Front Row (left to right): Manuel G., Brian D., Josh C., Kelly Horst, and Dr. Gibbia

The Phoenix Center began construction on the outdoor classroom used to house the program last year and officially launched the Horticulture Program this Spring in hopes of touching all areas of our students' learning. The Phoenix Center's Science teacher, Kelly Horst, explains, "Gardening itself can be addressed by all Core Curriculum Content Areas, not just science. There are stories and articles the students can read about in Language Arts. The students can research "cash crops" and regional agricultural products in Social Studies. They also have to use their math skills to measure the plots and determine how much soil is needed. Students can then track the growth of their plants. This is just a glimpse of how the Horticulture program can be part of everyday content in the academic arena."

The Phoenix Center is also looking to broaden our students' functional skills. A school garden provides the students the means to learn landscaping skills as well as how to plant and take care of different types of gardens, whether they are vegetable or ornamental. It also allows us to visually demonstrate the difference between these types of gardens. Additionally, it teaches the students a marketable skill and a hobby.

Student Javen M. during a Horticulture Therapy Session.

Horticulture also touches other areas of teaching the "whole student". Occupational therapists work with students in this program to address different textures and sensory needs. Physical therapists address muscle tone, balance, posture, and coordination. Speech therapists work with identification and have students describe what they see.

The program is still in its infancy but has been very successful in exposing the students to plants as well as the joys of gardening. "The students love to get their hands dirty. They seem to be learning an appreciation for gardening," says Kelly Horst. Classroom teacher Michelle DiDonato sees students applying information they have learned in class to the program. "Many of the students are exposed to information about plants and gardening through group science lessons, worksheets, and teacher created materials. The Horticulture Program has given the students a hands-on way to apply what they are learning!"

New Website Launch

The Phoenix Center recently launched it's new website (www.phoenixcenterinc.com) designed to increase awareness of the school. The new site has more parent-friendly explanations of the often complex approaches the school takes to helping it's students learn and communicate. These include relationship-based programs like "Bridge to Learning," community-based instruction to build life skills, and the use of sophisticated communication devices. The site describes each of the different levels of classrooms at the school: functional; functional academic; developmental/academic, and collaborative team model. Additionally, it provides an in-depth look at the curriculum, the extracurricular and life skills programs, and the specialized techniques and methods used at the school. It also provides links to newsletters, press clips, fundraising opportunities, and has on-line donation accepting capability. Check it out and give us your comments.

Fundraising / Development

The Phoenix Center relies on the generosity of corporations, local community organizations, foundations and individuals to supplement its wide range of programs and services for its students. While The Phoenix Center receives public support from the school districts that place students at the Center, it must supplement the tuition these school districts provide due to the increasing costs of special education programs and the budget constraints of the sending school districts.

We sincerely thank the organizations who provided major support and grants totaling $168,000 for the year ending June 30, 2010. These monies have allowed us to provide additional family, leisure, arts, recreation, and transition programs for our students which in turn help us live out our mission.

Contributing Organizations:

Catholic Human Services Foundation
Columbia Bank Foundation
Copper Beech Foundation
Robert and Joan Dircks Foundation
Ferraro Foundation for Science & the Disabled
Dorothy B. Hersh Foundation
Inserra Shop Rite Supermarkets
The Kids Foundation
Knights of Columbus Lafayette Council
Knights of Columbus St. Mary's Council
Knights of York
Lillian Pitkin Schenck Fund
John Victor Machuga Foundation
Norman & Bettina Roberts Foundation
Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation
Ramsey Area Garden Club
St. Elizabeth's Parish Sharing Program

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THE PHOENIX CENTER CURRENTLY SERVES STUDENTS FROM TEN COUNTIES IN THE FOLLOWING NEW JERSEY SCHOOL DISTRICTS:
Belleville, Bergenfield, Bloomfield, Boonton, Butler, Carlstadt/East Rutherford, Clifton, Cranford, Cresskill,Dover, East Orange, Elmwood Park, Fair Lawn, Glen Ridge, Hanover Park, Harrison, Hasbrouck Heights, Hawthorne, High Point Regional, Hoboken, Irvington, Jersey City, Kearny, Kinnelon, Lakeland Regional, Leonia, Lindon, Livingston, Lodi, Manchester Regional, Middlesex, Millburn, Montclair, Montville, Morris Hills Regional, Morris School District, Mt. Olive, Newark, New Providence, North Arlington, North Bergen, Nutley, Park Ridge, Pascack Valley Regional, Parsippany, Passaic, Passaic Valley Regional, Patterson, Perth Amboy, Pequannock Township, Pompton Lakes, Ramapo/Indian Hills, Ramsey, Ridgefield, Ridgefield Park, Ringwood, Rochelle Park, Rockaway, Roselle, Roxbury, Secaucus, Tenafly, Union City, Vernon, Verona, Wayne, West Essex Regional District, Westfield, West Milford, West Morris Regional, West New York, West Orange, Westwood Regional.