



MARCH 2022: LUCKY CHARMS 🍀

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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FOCUS ON PHOENIX

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Keeping with the theme of **A Rainbow of Possibilities** 🌈, we thought it fitting for this month in particular to celebrate all of our "lucky charms!" Among our lucky charms are, of course, our staff members! In this issue, we feature four of them: Ashley Agresti, Kelly Golembeski, Virginia (Ginny) Lataro and Regan McKinlay. We are both so proud and fortunate to work with these amazing educators and thought leaders in the field of special education. These professionals are so well-regarded, that all four presented at this school year's ASAH conference for special educators.

ASAH is a "not-for-profit organization of private schools and agencies in New Jersey that provides highly specialized services to more than 10,000 infants, children and young adults with disabilities. Founded in 1974, ASAH now serves 129 schools and agencies throughout the state," including The Phoenix Center. For more information about ASAH, please visit www.ASAH.org.

Also included in this issue is a spotlight on one of our most recent "lucky charms"—Mr. Steven DeMatteis from **DeMatteis Real Estate**! Welcome to the family, Steve! Lastly, you'll find a sneak peek of our 2022 Casino Night fundraising event, scheduled for Friday, April 8th.

Hope you enjoy reading about our "TPC lucky charms." I look forward to seeing you on April 8th! Until next time, take care, be well, and stay connected.

With gratitude,

Julie Mower, M.A.Ed.
Executive Director



The Phoenix Center is hiring!
TEACHERS & PARAPROFESSIONALS WANTED

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.



THE PHOENIX CENTER'S “LUCKY CHARMS”

*From left to right:
Ginny, Kelly, Regan, Ashley*

For those of you who have been around TPC for a while, you have probably met this fabulous four: Ashley Agresti, Kelly Golembeski, Virginia (Ginny) Lataro and Regan McKinlay. For those new to us, join us in celebrating our “lucky charms.”



Kelly Golembeski

The gregarious leader of Room 203 is in her 19th year at TPC. Kelly started as a paraprofessional in 2002. From there, she earned her first masters degree in special education, becoming a TPC classroom teacher, and attained a subsequent masters in administration and supervision.

Most recently, she presented at the ASAH Annual Conference on behalf of TPC on the *Role of the Paraprofessional*, which was an in-depth explanation of behavior intervention and management for paraprofessionals, including data collection (such as discrete trials, task analyses, “permanent product” which is ‘industry speak’ for worksheets, workbooks and assignments, best practices, etc.)

“Most of what I have learned, I learned at TPC, not in school. The way the teachers, supervisors, administration, related service providers, and paraprofessionals work together as a team is so unique and special. Our conversations, internal workshops and collaborative team meetings all serve to enhance and foster more learning and success for one another, and ultimately, the students. As an example, the Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) are in the classroom with us—showing us what to do, what to try, what could work and why with the students.”

Kelly points out that you “have to create the habit before it can become a behavior.” She explains that this is the way TPC cares for its students. “We take the time to get to know the kids and play to their strengths. For us, graduation is not necessarily the end of our relationship between the student and TPC.”

“Parents will say to us, I wish I had found you sooner...I knew when I walked in and saw all the smiles—you can feel and see the love when you walk into the school. It’s a wealth of love.”



Virginia “Ginny” Lataro

Virginia “Ginny” Lataro, Certified School Nurse, is another one of TPC’s “lucky charms.” Ginny initially came to TPC to fill in for a staff nurse for 10 weeks in 2017. As we often hear from our staff, “the rest is history”...the 10 weeks turned into substituting for Nurses Cathy and Connie (who both retired last year), to three days a week, to now running the Nursing team at TPC.

Ginny has had a long history of helping people through the healthcare field. She initially went to school to become a registered dental hygienist. Subsequently, she returned to school and achieved her RN. During her tenure at TPC, Ginny realized her calling was to serve this community, and went back to school to get her BSN, CSN (Bachelor of Science of Nursing/Certified School Nurse). Ginny now serves as Coordinator of TPC’s nursing team of three.

An eager team player, Ginny describes the health office as “an amazing, competent, collaborative team that works together seamlessly every day. I can rest assured that even if or when I am not physically in the building, the health office is in great shape with these wonderful and caring ladies—and that they have it covered.”

Ginny presented *An Update on Seizure Medications in the School Systems Today* at ASAH’s Annual Conference. She provided an update on Paul’s Law, seizure training through the Epilepsy Foundation, the new classifications of seizures and new delivery system of medications.

When she is not at TPC, Kelly can be found reading, taking long walks with her dog, Perry, and being a personal Uber driver for her 14-year-old daughter Hannah.

Her collaboration extends outside the building to her peer nurses at other ASAH schools. To stay connected and benefit from real-time collaboration with other nurses who often face similar complex issues to TPC, Ginny is part of a 75-80 school nurse group that shares scenarios, experiences and current information on best practices and outcomes within the special needs community. “It’s like having an additional support group of savvy practitioners that understand our world to validate when/if we need it and I also enjoy helping other nurses too. I like to pay it forward.”

“This school gets under your skin, and into your blood. My husband Steve and I have never had our own kids, but I truly feel that the TPC kids are mine and that God put me in this place intentionally.”



Ashley Agresti

Our beloved Ashley started at TPC 12 years ago at the age of 19 as a paraprofessional/substitute. Once she experienced the school, she decided she wanted to be a classroom teacher, and earned her bachelors in Elementary/Special Education. Spoiler alert: Ashley recently completed her masters in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University!

Through the years, Ashley has been in a lot of different places at TPC: five different classrooms as a paraprofessional, co-teaching with now Integrative Technology Coordinator, Marc Restaino, and leading our Consumer Family Life (CFL) program since 2014 with great success. Ashley can now be found in Room 204 teaching students ages 17-20.

Her philosophy of education: relationship-based learning between the teacher and the students works best when the learning is experiential. Ashley says, "I rely heavily on the support staff; we all have a strong relationship with each other; I love collaborating with my peers and staff (especially the paraprofessionals) because I too want to invest in them—the same way my colleagues did with me many years ago. They saw that I had potential and encouraged me. I enjoy paying it forward and helping other people succeed."

"TPC is where my heart is...The people I love are here, the people I care about most are here. We've all grown up here."



Regan McKinlay

As she tells it, Regan's approach to teaching is best captured by Ignacio Estrada's quote, "If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn," and the often quoted, "It takes a village."

Regan has been at TPC for nine years, starting in the 2013 as a paraprofessional. A year later, she was hired as a full-time classroom teacher. Since then, she's taught all age groups—from ages 8-18 and is currently the classroom teacher in Room 106 (ages 12-14). Regan describes the environment as "super-collaborative between teams"—behavior, therapeutic, curriculum, nursing.

She has an undergraduate degree (in family & child studies) and a masters degree from Montclair State University in Special Education. In 2017, Regan went back to school for her BCBA (Florida Institute of Technology). She is currently finishing her schooling towards her certification as a Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDTc).

At ASAH, she presented *A Functioning Functional Program*, wherein she spoke about TPC's Consumer Family Life Skills program and our restaurant vocational training/skills program. "In the best scenario for programs like these, you engage the students visually as they watch you demonstrate, from an auditory perspective as they listen and then also engage the tactile learner by touch or movement," Ashley says. "The silver lining to COVID-19 has been that it forced me to be even more creative. As an example, there was no cooking last year so we had to emulate baking, made faux cupcakes and used shaving cream instead of frosting. We had to perform the actions of washing dishes with soaps and sponges, without water, and on and on...but we had the students engaged and learning, despite it all."

Regan said, "I am very happy to have started my teaching career here as it has been a total immersive learning experience that the seven years of academia did not prepare me for. The technology here alone is pretty exceptional; between our Funtronic therapy room to our iPads, chromebooks, etc. We really engage our students with the technologies that work for them."

At the ASAH conference, she co-presented *The Role of the Paraprofessional* (with Kelly Golembeski). Regan explains, "The most important part of it all is maintaining an open communication between teacher and paraprofessionals. You have to not only talk, but also ask questions—you have to be on the same page. In my classroom, we have a weekly check-in status meeting to make sure we are all in sync. My classroom should run with or without me. My head paraprofessional is Angela Alday, and she's terrific. I enjoy mentoring new teachers in the school. I have had such great experiences with parents in this school as well...especially with virtual learning. ■"

"As soon as you walk into TPC, you get a family vibe. Family is the one word that I would come up with to describe this school. You all become family together, you get close to the students, the families, other staff members—it's incredibly unique."

SPOTLIGHT ON: STEVEN A. DEMATTHEIS OF DEMATTHEIS REAL ESTATE

The Phoenix Center Foundation is thrilled to announce one of its newest major donors: Steven A. DeMattheis of *DeMattheis Real Estate*. He is the founder and CEO of *DeMattheis Real Estate, LLC* and *DeMattheis Development, LLC*. Steve and his sons are presently developing 306 units of luxury apartments in NJ.

Steve was introduced to TPC through Columbia Bank, initially supporting the Gala honoring Tom Kemly in June of 2021, and has increased his support ever since.

Having served on Boards specifically focused on children and families with special needs—a philanthropic focus area for Steve—he was immediately drawn to the work, environment and community that is The Phoenix Center.

Steve said it best when we interviewed him, “I have been looking for 10 years for an organization that I could trust was in alignment with my values and would give me the opportunity to help families and children with special needs. In these cases, when families are dealt a difficult hand these situations become life-altering, and I am committed to making whatever financial contributions I can to make a positive impact.”

His three children—Alec, Kaitlyn and Jonathan—who are also part of the family business and share Dad’s philanthropic objectives, will be actively involved in the ongoing support and contributions to Friends of The Phoenix Center Foundation. Steve added, “I have a cousin with Down syndrome, and I am close with other people who have children or siblings with special needs, and that can be very stressful. My family and I see TPC as a place where we can focus our attention on one charity and make a real commitment and contribution.”

“The hardships I have had in my own life, whether that be



From left to right: Alec DeMattheis, President; Steven DeMattheis, Founder, DeMattheis Development; Jonathan DeMattheis, Manager of Operations; Kaitlyn DeMattheis, Director of Public Relations & Philanthropy

business or personal, make me acutely aware of how very fortunate I am to have persevered and succeeded. I am very grateful to have found an organization that my family and I feel connected with. Helping the children and their families is of paramount importance to us. The best way we can achieve that is to support the wonderful teachers and staff, which is composed of people who have been gifted by God for such a purpose. The commitment, character and love the teachers and staff show to the children and their families, is without question the most noble calling God commands of us.”

He concluded with, “In one word, The Phoenix Center is ‘love’.”

Welcome to The Phoenix Center Family, Steve, Alec, Kaitlyn and Jonathan! We look forward to doing great things together! ■



SEE YOU AT CASINO NIGHT!

Join us for Casino Night on Friday, April 8th from 6-10 PM at TPC. It will be a fun evening of gambling, beer, wine, passed hors d'oeuvres, dessert and prizes! This year’s Title Sponsor is DeMattheis Real Estate. Play the slots or Black Jack, win our 50/50, or one of our great silent auction items/prizes! Please go to our website at thephoenixcenternj.org/casino-night to register. ■



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PLEASE HELP US SAVE TREES & TPC MONEY!

In an effort to save money, and some trees, The Phoenix Center is in the process of transitioning to an exclusively electronic newsletter. Please email CSharaway@thephoenixcenternj.org to be added to our list! Many thanks!



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WAYS TO SUPPORT TPC

Your gift to Friends of The Phoenix Center Foundation supports needs not covered by tuition dollars, enabling us to continue to deliver superior educational experiences and therapeutic services. These options include:

Annual Gift

A gift that supports the general operating costs needed to provide the highest quality of academic and therapeutic services for our students. Your gift ensures annual expenses are met so we can focus on the students' needs. It covers needs not met through tuition dollars.

Major Gift

A gift of \$5,000 or more that supports either a specific project or general operating costs.

Recurring Gift

A monthly gift to support general operating costs. This reliable source of income is especially impactful.

Matching Gift

A great way to double your donation. Visit the donate page on our website to see if your employer provides matching gifts.

Planned Giving

The *Dr. Geraldine Gibbia Legacy Society* honors and celebrates planned giving contributions that benefit current and future generations of TPC students and their families. As a member of *TPC's Legacy Society* you will be an eternal supporter of our mission. Making a planned gift means promoting a sustainable future for our students with special needs and their families.

Endowment

Establishing an account in which the earned interest is used to support the needs of The Phoenix Center. The needs can be general operating or allocated to a specific program or project.

**To discuss your gift options, please contact
Development Officer, Carolyn Sharaway, 973.542.0743,
ext. 403 or csharaway@thephoenixcenternj.org.**