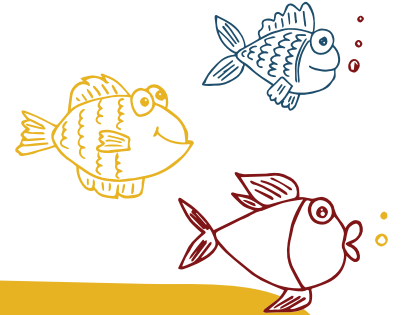




PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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FOCUS ON PHOENIX



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A GREAT BIG THANK YOU TO OUR CASINO NIGHT SPONSORS, TO DATE



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WE ARE HIRING!

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



April is a special month at The Phoenix Center because we get to celebrate an important part of our student population: those with ASD/Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In this issue, we are privileged to have Charlie Singer — a former student with ASD, and now paraprofessional here at TPC —

share his point-of-view on autism and the misconceptions associated with it.

We are thrilled to also be featuring a former TPC parent and long-time board member, supporter and sponsor, Jeff Hecker. Erin, Jeff's daughter graduated in 2019 and Jeff continues to do great work with and for us. It was his network that ultimately connected us with the Marilyn Lichtman Foundation, also featured in this issue.

Teacher Spotlight focuses on Christos Karoutsos, from Classroom 207. He is beloved by his students and fellow colleagues, and after reading his interview, you will see why.

Like many schools, TPC is currently hiring. We are looking for classroom teachers, a health and physical education teacher, school bus drivers and paraprofessionals. If you know of anyone who fits this bill, don't hesitate to reach out!

Looking forward to seeing you at Casino Night! Until next time, take care, be well 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.



When you were at TPC, did you have a favorite TPC school tradition or activity?

After nearly three decades traditions have come and gone. However, my personal favorites were going to Camp Bernie, Bowcraft Amusement Park, Phoenix Carnivals/Fun Days, and ASAH Art contests

Is there an accomplishment you're particularly proud of during your time at The Phoenix Center?

I won 2nd place in the ASAH Art contest in 2001!

After graduating, what do you hope the students and their families take away from The Phoenix Center?

No matter what your diagnosis is, no matter where you start, you are not limited by others expectations. You are only limited by how much you believe in yourself.

Because April is Autism Acceptance Month, we thought it would be good to have you share your perspective. What would you like people to know about autism?

Autism is a spectrum not a disease, a neurotype not a mental illness. We have varying comprehension levels just like non-autistic individuals. While the media largely stereotypes us, many on the spectrum have done great things. Greta Thunberg (Climate Activist), Haley Moss (Lawyer), Anthony Hopkins and Dan Akroyd (Actors), Tim Burton (Director), and Nikola Tesla (Inventor) are among the many success stories of autism.

Tell us one thing about yourself that not very many people know.

I am passionate about weather, and do my own forecasts.

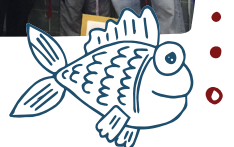
SPECIAL FEATURE ON: CHARLIE SINGER, FORMER STUDENT AND PARAPROFESSIONAL AT TPC

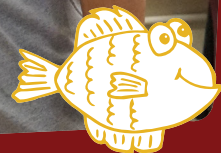
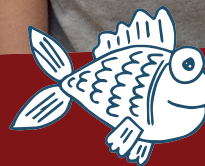
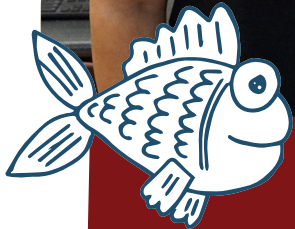
Tell me about your journey: from The Phoenix Center to what you are doing now.

I began my journey with The Phoenix Center in October of 1994. I was sent here from Washington Park School in Totowa to seek a more therapeutic environment regarding learning disabilities and behaviors. Many at TPC took an interest in me early on: Julie Mower (then Art teacher), Amy M. and Kim W. (then Speech therapists), and co-founders Dr. Geraldine Gibbia and Dr. Douglas Berrian.

By 2002, I began to transition back to my home district, as both my academics and behaviors were at appropriate levels. I officially graduated from TPC in 2004. I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society at Woodrow Wilson Middle School in 2006. I graduated high school in 2010 from Passaic County Technical Institute. Although my path was in the medical arts, I did not continue in the medical field. I began college at Bergen Community College in 2014, the same year I was promoted at my then job at CVS as an Overnight Supervisor.

In 2016 I was invited to Dr. G's retirement gala to speak on my experiences over the last 12 years. It was at this time that I was hired as a paraprofessional at TPC. By 2019, I graduated from BCC with a 3.9 GPA without any use of an IEP. I was also inducted into *Phi Theta Kappa*. COVID was a turning point in my journey, while I was maintaining a 3.95 GPA at Ramapo College with 24 credits, I had to drop out of school to get a second job to help my family. In 2021, I received my substitute teaching certificate and began working part time as custodial staff at TPC! My ultimate goal is to hopefully work as an Employment Specialist, so I can help others with job skills, just as TPC has done for me.





Teacher Spotlight: CHRISTOS KAROUTSOS

Tell me about your journey—how did you get into the field of special education?

I first got my degree to become a high school history teacher. I heard about The Phoenix Center from Dr. G and thought it would be a great place to get my feet wet and put something on my resume. Then after the first two months, I fell in love with the school and the atmosphere and went back to school to get my special-ed certification.

What separates The Phoenix Center from others in how it supports and nourishes students with special needs?

It sounds cheesy, but it's our staff. We have a great core of staff here that will do anything for our students. We create great bonds with our students and each other and that isn't like many places. It is one of the reasons why I switched to go into special education. I worked in a family-run restaurant and to come here and really feel like one big family felt right to me, and I do not believe you can find that in every school. Not to mention we have great minds in each department from behavior to related services. I am always amazed at their knowledge and what they can come up with.

Do you have a favorite school tradition or activity?

Not sure if it counts but I love CBI. I love to take the students out in the

community and see them work. It makes me so happy to take a few steps back and see them walk around on their own. They might make mistakes, but they are learning more on their own and aren't relying on someone's prompts which is very important.

Is there an accomplishment you're particularly proud of during your time at The Phoenix Center?

There are a few accomplishments that I am proud of. It was an honor that my peers voted me as the Educator of the Year in 2019. But the accomplishment that I think more of is taking a student with high behavioral concerns out on the beach trip. His parents were in tears that we fought for him to be allowed to go, and the fact that he hadn't gone to the beach since he was a kid really felt amazing, and is something I won't forget.

AFTER GRADUATING, What DO YOU HOPE YOUR STUDENTS take away FROM The PHOENIX CENTER?

I want to see our students making choices in the activities they want to do and have an easier time transitioning to the next chapter of their lives. Being one of the teachers who started our Soars program, which prepares our students for over-21 transition programs, gives me particular pride.

HOW ARE PARENTS INTEGRATED INTO THE CULTURE AND EDUCATION AT THE PHOENIX CENTER?

I believe it is extremely beneficial to have fluid communication with the family and school so we can act as one unit. Parents and families are very involved at The Phoenix Center by coming to our school events like Family Night Out and Restaurant Night. With these activities, we are able to see how the students act with their parents and the parents are able to see what their child is able to do with us.

AS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT SCHOOL, HOW IMPORTANT ARE YOUR DONORS AND PATRONS?

We benefit greatly from our donors as this is how we are able to do all the extra great things for our students. With these donations, we are able to fund our CBI outings, which all our students need, as going out into the community is a major part of everyone's lives. Creating amazing treatment rooms like our MSE room, and our OT/ PT rooms with swings and other sensory equipment is also possible through our supporters — not to mention all the technology which we use daily from our SMARTBoards to iPads and Chromebooks. In addition, software and websites help us to modify and create work and activities.

GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE OF THE "TPC TEAM" WORKING TOGETHER ON SOMETHING AND HOW THAT SPEAKS TO THE CULTURE HERE. HOW IS THAT DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SCHOOLS/WORKING ENVIRONMENTS?

We are always working together — from having staff collaboration on what we see to what we can do to be better prepared for a student's routine. We also collaborate and do home visits so we can recreate/modify what we do



here at school at home to help support families. I had a case where a student of mine wasn't willing to get ready to go to school. So the behavior team and I would meet at his house when he woke up. We watched his usual routine so we could come up with ideas and materials to help him. We made a picture symbols board for his schedule and visual supports on a calendar to show him when we have school and when we do not. I do not know of many schools that would go in before work hours to a student's house to help with their morning routine.

TELL ME SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW ABOUT YOU!

There was a summer when I was fascinated with free diving. After reading a few books, I trained, and was able to go past 50 feet with one breath.

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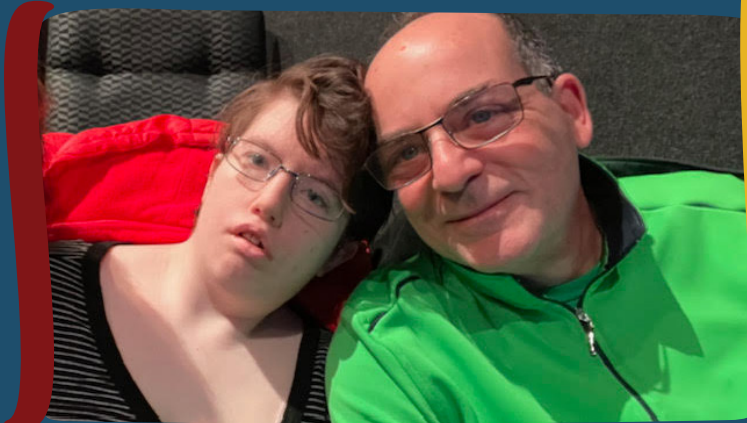
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SPOTLIGHT ON: JEFF HECKER, BOARD MEMBER & FORMER TPC PARENT

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT SEPARATES THE PHOENIX CENTER FROM OTHER SCHOOLS LIKE IT?

Easy question....it's the staff. Amazingly dedicated. It's a tireless daily grind...made even more challenging in the world of COVID. I couldn't be more proud of each and every staff member.

WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME A BOARD MEMBER AT TPC?

My daughter was a student for many years. The change in her (1000% for the better) was fantastic. I began to get to know staff and get involved with school activities, especially Casino Night. After Erin aged out, I was asked to join the board. It was my honor to do so.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE TPC SCHOOL TRADITION OR ACTIVITY?

I would say Casino Night as it brought me to the next level with the staff relationship-wise, but it really has to be graduation. The day my daughter became a high school graduate was the best day ever. A day I will never forget.

IS THERE AN ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF DURING YOUR TIME ON THE BOARD AT THE PHOENIX CENTER?

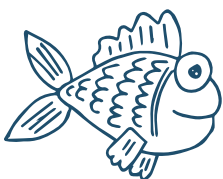
Being a member of the board during COVID and seeing first hand how Julie and her staff navigated each and every hurdle...always with a smile...it was inspirational.

AFTER GRADUATING, WHAT DO YOU HOPE THE STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES TAKE AWAY FROM THE PHOENIX CENTER?

My hope is that every parent sees that their child is better prepared for adulthood from their time at school. I know I did with my daughter Erin.

TELL US ONE THING ABOUT YOURSELF THAT NOT VERY MANY PEOPLE KNOW...

Somewhat of an open secret, but my true passion is food and wine. I make wine with friends in Napa Valley and I am a Fellow at the Culinary Institute of America.



Acknowledging the Introduction to the Marilyn Lichtman Foundation

Dave, a friend of Jeff's, introduced TPC to the Marilyn Lichtman Foundation. They just awarded TPC a \$5,800 grant to purchase 14 Chromebooks. This is our third grant award from them. Thank you to the Marilyn Lichtman Foundation, Dave and Jeff! Relationships are everything to us. 😊



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PLEASE HELP US SAVE TREES & TPC MONEY!

In an effort to cut expenses, save money and some trees,
please provide your email address to csharaway@thephoenixcenternj.org.



The Phoenix Center is hiring!
TO FIND OUT MORE VISIT OUR WEBSITE

TPC is hiring a health and PE teacher, classroom teachers, part-time & full-time paraprofessionals, and a school bus driver. Please spread the word! Visit [our website!](#)