

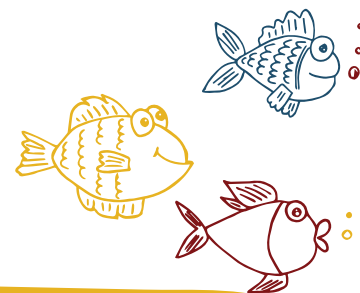


SPRING 2025: A SEASON OF SERVICE & VOLUNTEERISM

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR
**LIFE BEYOND THE
CLASSROOM**

est. 1991

FOCUS ON PHOENIX



What's inside



SPOTLIGHT ON
BOARD MEMBER KIM OAKES



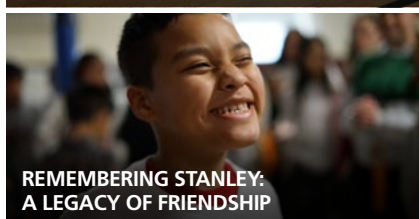
SHINING A LIGHT ON OUR UNSUNG
HEROES: TPC'S CUSTODIAL TEAM



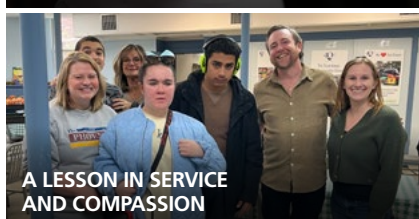
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A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Dear Phoenix Center Family,

Welcome to our Spring newsletter! This marking period, we're celebrating service and volunteerism, and our community truly shines. Inside, you'll discover how a dedicated board member guides TPC, witness our community's support for a family during tragedy, and meet our unsung heroes—our incredible custodial team. We're also thrilled to share the success

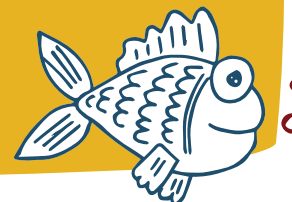
of our Restaurant Program, featured on News12, a true reflection of TPC's heart.

Our commitment extends beyond the classroom. For April's Financial Literacy Month, we've highlighted the importance of future planning for our students. In addition, the generous donations from our students and staff to local food pantries exemplify our community's powerful commitment to volunteerism.

Don't forget, our Casino Night fundraiser is just around the corner! I look forward to seeing you on Friday, May 2nd! Let's continue to celebrate and support each other.

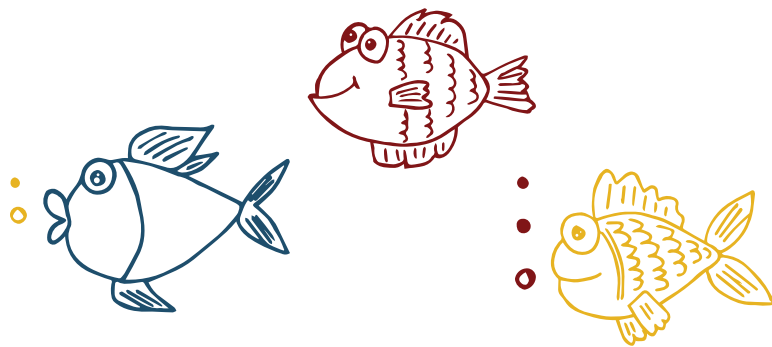
Thank you for being an essential part of our Phoenix Center family. As we continue our journey, let's celebrate these milestones and embrace every opportunity to serve and support one another.

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.

The PHOENIX SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBER KIM OAKES



TELL ME ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY — HOW DID YOU GET INTO SPECIAL EDUCATION?

My path to special education wasn't a straight line, but a journey of discovery. Initially, I envisioned a career in nursing, particularly pediatrics or labor and delivery, driven by my passion for working with children. However, my consistent part-time work at Spectrum for Living, an intermediate care facility for adults with developmental disabilities, provided a different perspective. That experience, coupled with volunteering for the Special Olympics and participating in college-sponsored programs for individuals with special needs, ignited a deeper interest.

A pivotal moment occurred when my college advisor, who oversaw these special needs programs, recognized my natural affinity and encouraged me to explore education. This led me to shift my focus, adding special and elementary education to my psychology degree. I graduated in 1988 with certifications in these areas and immediately began my career as a special education teacher in a private program similar to The Phoenix Center.

Over nineteen years, I honed my skills, earning a Master's in Special Education and a Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDT-C) certification. This expertise then transitioned into a public school setting, where I joined the Child Study Team as an LDT-C. My experience spans pre-K through high school, encompassing a diverse range of educational needs and classifications. Ultimately, my journey from aspiring nurse to dedicated special educator was fueled by a genuine desire to empower children with unique learning needs.

WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME A BOARD MEMBER AT TPC?

My connection to The Phoenix Center (TPC) runs deep. I've been aware of its impactful work since its early days, having met Dr. G, its co-founder, in 1991. My friendship with Julie Mower, TPC's Executive Director, also spans many years. Professionally, as an LDT-C, I've collaborated with TPC staff, notably when I placed a student from my caseload at the school. Following that student's graduation, I was honored to be invited to apply for a position on the Board.

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

As a member of the Child Study Team in a public school, I have the opportunity to visit many private special education programs. The Phoenix Center genuinely treats each child as an individual. They collaborate closely with the sending district to develop an IEP that includes suitable academic goals, objectives, and related services. Additionally, they offer support to families through various programs, from counseling to Family Night Out.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE TPC SCHOOL TRADITION OR ACTIVITY?

I love attending school concerts and watching the students shine as they perform on stage. I also enjoy going to Casino Night, where I can mingle with staff and board members and meet families.

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

I'm most proud of contributing to The Phoenix Center's resilience and adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being able to provide timely and relevant feedback to the administration during that challenging period was particularly fulfilling. Additionally, I've valued the opportunity to collaborate with the curriculum department on teacher training, further supporting the school's commitment to excellence. Of course, being part of a board dedicated to such a vital mission is a constant source of pride.

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

I hope the families understand that their child received an education from a team of professionals who consistently advocated for their child's growth and learning.

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

Football is in my blood! Growing up, my dad had Giants season tickets, and those memories of us at the stadium, cheering our hearts out, are some of my most cherished. That passion never faded. In fact, since 2014, I've had the incredible opportunity to work part-time at MetLife Stadium. I get to experience the thrill of every home game — Giants and Jets alike — plus concerts and even soccer matches this year.



SHINING A LIGHT ON OUR UNSUNG HEROES: TPC'S CUSTODIAL TEAM

At The Phoenix Center, we're fortunate to have a dedicated team that ensures our learning environment is safe, clean, and welcoming. While they may not always be in the spotlight, our custodians are truly the backbone of our daily operations. This month, we want to take a moment to celebrate Frank Ortiz, Benel Bayard, and Jeff Psota, our incredible custodial staff.



"AFTER 31 YEARS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, INCLUDING HERE AT THE PHOENIX CENTER, I'VE SEEN SOMETHING TRULY REMARKABLE HERE. IT'S THE UNWAVERING LOVE AND KINDNESS THE STAFF GIVE THESE KIDS. THAT'S WHY I LOVE IT, AND WHY I'M SO PROUD TO BE A PART OF TPC."

Frank Ortiz, a fixture at TPC since 1994, has been a constant presence, providing unwavering dedication for nearly three decades. His experience and commitment are invaluable.

"IN THE PAST 13 YEARS, THE THINGS I ENJOYED MOST ABOUT WORKING AT THE PHOENIX CENTER ARE KEEPING THE BUILDING AND GROUNDS UP-TO-DATE. WHILE ALSO WORKING WITH THE STAFF AND TEACHERS. HOWEVER, NOTHING IS MORE MEANINGFUL TO ME THAN INTERACTING WITH THE STUDENTS - THEY REALLY MAKE MY DAY SPECIAL IN SO MANY WAYS."

Jeff Psota, who joined the TPC family in 2012, consistently goes above and beyond, tackling every task with efficiency and a smile.

"WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT THE PHOENIX CENTER IS THE WONDERFUL COMMUNITY. MY FOCUS IS ALWAYS ON HELPING OUR STUDENTS RECOGNIZE AND EMBRACE THEIR STRENGTHS."

Benel Bayard, who joined us as a custodian in 2010, brings a unique perspective to his role. Before keeping our building in top shape, Benel spent eight years as a paraprofessional in one of our classrooms, demonstrating his deep understanding of our students' needs.

Together, Frank, Benel, and Jeff work tirelessly to maintain our building's pristine condition, ensuring a healthy and safe environment for our students and staff. They are always ready to lend a helping hand, whether it's setting up for an event, fixing a leaky faucet, or simply offering a friendly greeting.

Let's take a moment to express our gratitude to Frank, Benel, and Jeff for their invaluable contributions to The Phoenix Center. Thank you for keeping our school shining!

APRIL IS FINANCIAL LITERACY MONTH: SECURE YOUR LEGACY WITH A PLANNED GIFT TO THE PHOENIX CENTER

This April, as we recognize Financial Literacy Month, we invite you to consider the enduring impact you can make through planned giving to The Phoenix Center (TPC). Beyond immediate support, planned gifts offer a powerful way to ensure the future of our vital programs for children with special needs.

Leave a Lasting Legacy

- **Planned Gifts:** Create a legacy that reflects your commitment to TPC's mission. Options include bequests in your will, charitable gift annuities, and beneficiary designations.
- **Trusts:** Establish a charitable trust to benefit TPC, providing potential tax advantages while supporting our work.
- **Stock and Securities:** Donate appreciated stocks or other marketable securities. This can offer significant tax benefits, allowing you to avoid capital gains taxes while supporting TPC.

By incorporating TPC into your financial planning, you can ensure that your support continues to make a difference for generations to come.

FINANCIAL LITERACY AND CHARITABLE GIVING

Understanding the financial implications of planned giving is an essential aspect of financial literacy. We are here to help you navigate these options and find the giving strategy that aligns with your financial goals and philanthropic aspirations.

CONNECT WITH US

To explore how you can make a planned gift, set up a trust, or donate stock to The Phoenix Center, please contact our Development Officer, Carolyn Sharaway.

- **Phone:** 973.542.0743, ext. 403
- **Email:** csharaway@thephoenixcenternj.org

Let's work together to build a secure and thriving future for the children we serve.



REMEMBERING STANLEY: A LEGACY OF FRIENDSHIP

The holiday season, typically a time of joy and togetherness, was overshadowed this past Christmas by the heartbreaking loss of eight-year-old Stanley. His unexpected passing left a void in the hearts of his classmates, teachers, and the entire community at The Phoenix Center. Stanley, with his radiant smile and gentle spirit, had a unique ability to connect with others, leaving an indelible mark on everyone he encountered.

Stanley's presence was a constant source of warmth and laughter. He possessed an innate kindness that shone through in his interactions, fostering a sense of belonging for those around him. The Phoenix Center is dedicating a "Buddy Bench" for the school playground in his honor.

To fund this meaningful project, Stanley's classroom teacher, Chloe, spearheaded a heartfelt cookie fundraiser. With meticulous care and love, she baked countless cookies. The outpouring of support from the community



was overwhelming, resulting in an impressive \$2,000 raised in Stanley's honor. These funds will directly support the purchase and installation of the "Buddy Bench."

In keeping with The Phoenix Center's emphasis on service and community, the Buddy Bench stands as a lasting symbol of friendship and inclusion.



CASINO NIGHT: ROLLING THE DICE FOR A CAUSE

A NIGHT OF FUN, FRIENDS, AND FUNDRAISING

On Friday, May 2nd, The Phoenix Center will host its annual Casino Night, transforming our gymnasium into a lively casino floor. Parents, staff, community members, and local businesses will come together to try their luck at blackjack, roulette, and poker—all for a great cause. Proceeds from the event will enrich the programs and services that help to ensure our students continue to gain real-world experiences that foster independence.

Why it Matters

Casino Night is not just about games and prizes. It is a celebration of service and volunteerism, with local sponsors and volunteers generously donating their time, resources, and expertise. The success of the evening underscores the incredible community support that makes The Phoenix Center's mission possible.



A LESSON IN SERVICE AND COMPASSION: ROOM 205 HELPS FEED THE COMMUNITY

Classroom teacher Matt Ryan and his generous students and staff in room 205 exemplified the true spirit of service this past year by organizing a remarkable food drive for Toni's Kitchen (toniskitchen.org). Their efforts resulted in a donation of enough food to create a staggering 30 packages, providing vital sustenance to individuals and families facing food insecurity in our community.

But room 205's dedication went beyond simply collecting donations. They rolled up their sleeves and personally delivered the collected items to Toni's Kitchen, where they meticulously sorted and organized the food. This hands-on experience provided a powerful lesson in the importance of direct involvement and the impact of collective action.

This initiative perfectly embodies our character education program's focus this marking period on **service and volunteerism**. We strive to instill in our students the understanding that contributing to the well-being of others is a fundamental responsibility and a source of profound personal fulfillment.



News12 Visits The Phoenix Center's Restaurant Program: A RECIPE FOR LIFE SKILLS!

We are delighted to announce that News12 recently featured The Phoenix Center's innovative *Restaurant Program*, bringing well-deserved attention to the remarkable work our students are doing. This program is a cornerstone of our commitment to providing practical, real-world learning experiences.

The News12 segment beautifully captured the essence of our program, showcasing how students actively participate in all aspects of a restaurant setting. They learn essential culinary skills, from preparing delicious meals to general kitchen health and safety. Beyond the kitchen, they develop crucial customer service abilities, practicing table setting, order taking, and engaging with "customers" – our dedicated staff and friendly classmates.

What makes this program truly exceptional is its focus on building vital life skills. As highlighted by News12, the *Restaurant Program* cultivates teamwork, communication, and confidence. These skills are not just valuable in a restaurant environment, they are fundamental for our students to navigate life successfully after graduation.

TUNE IN AND SEE THE IMPACT

We encourage you to watch the News12 feature and witness firsthand the dedication and enthusiasm of our students and staff. You'll see how this hands-on experience is making a tangible difference in their lives.

EXPLORE THE PROGRAM FURTHER

To delve deeper into the *Restaurant Program* and read more about its impact, please visit our website:

- **Restaurant Program: A Recipe for Success**
Beyond the Classroom tinyurl.com/3vksfba8

We are immensely proud of our students and grateful for the recognition from News12. This program exemplifies The Phoenix Center's dedication to empowering students with the skills they need to lead fulfilling and independent lives.





PREPARING STUDENTS FOR
**LIFE BEYOND THE
CLASSROOM**

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Get YOUR tickets here:



DID YOU KNOW?

TPC programs and services have been featured 6 times in
various print, online and news stations so far this school year!