

Preparing students for



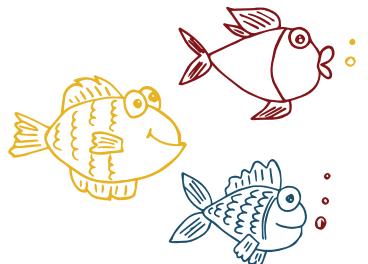
FALL 2025: BUILDING A LEGACY  
FOR THE NEXT 35 YEARS

CELEBRATING  
**35 YEARS**  
OF EXCELLENCE

est. 1991

life beyond the classroom

# FOCUS ON Phoenix



## What's inside



OUR LONGEST TENURED STAFFERS!



SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBER



TPC HOSTED A WORKSHOP



TPC CAREERS

## A Message FROM the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we move through the 2025-2026 school year, our theme of mindfulness invites us to pause and reflect on how we show up for our students, our families, and one another. At The Phoenix Center, mindfulness is more than a mindset; it's an intentional practice rooted in presence, compassion, and purpose. Whether through quiet classroom routines, sensory-friendly spaces, or professional development that nurtures staff well-being, we are continually strengthening the ways we support our community.

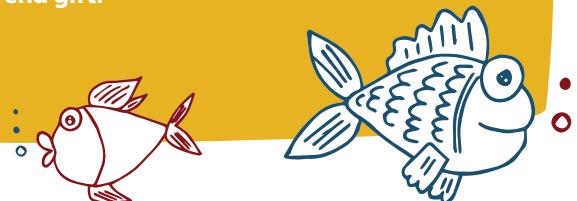


This year also marks an extraordinary milestone, The Phoenix Center's 35th anniversary! For more than three decades, our mission has remained steadfast: to educate, empower, and enrich the lives of students ages 5-21 with autism, multiple disabilities, and behavioral and intellectual challenges. Our ability to maintain excellence is the result of a shared belief in doing what matters most, meeting each student where they are and helping them thrive.

In this issue, you'll hear from some of our Foundational Crew, dedicated team members who have shaped TPC's story for over 20 years, and learn more about our Transition Department, which prepares students for life beyond the classroom.

Please save the date for our 35th Anniversary Gala on May 2, 2026 at Macaluso's in Hawthorne, NJ, and consider supporting our mission with a year-end gift.

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.

# SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBER



## WELCOMING FRANKLIN (FRANK) BARBOSA, JR.

In this issue, we're pleased to introduce our newest Board Member, Franklin Barbosa, Jr., Counsel at Schenck, Price, Smith & King (SPSK), LLP. His lifelong passion for special education, combined with his professional expertise and personal connection to The Phoenix Center make him a wonderful addition to our community.

### TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY. HOW DID YOU GET INTO SPECIAL EDUCATION? TELL US ABOUT YOUR ROLE AT SPSK

I have always had a deep interest in special education. In fact, before I became an attorney, I strongly considered becoming a special education teacher. While at Drew University, I participated in a joint certification program with the College of Saint Elizabeth, where I took courses in teaching general and special education. Those experiences gave me a profound appreciation for the dedication and compassion it takes to help students with unique learning needs reach their full potential. Although my career path ultimately led me to law, that early foundation in education shaped my perspective in powerful ways and, I believe, helped me become a more compassionate person.

### WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME A BOARD MEMBER AT TPC?

I have known The Phoenix Center's Executive Director, Julie Mower, for several years. Her son, Zack, and I attended Drew University together, and our wives were roommates; they remain the closest of friends to this day. Through that connection, I often heard Zack talk about the life-changing work being done at The Phoenix Center and the impact it had on students and their families.

When Julie approached me about the possibility of joining the Board, it was an easy decision. Given my long-standing interest in special education and deep respect for the school's mission, I did not hesitate. The Phoenix Center's work is virtuous, transformative, and perfectly aligned with the values that have guided me throughout my personal and professional life.

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

Admittedly, I am no authority on the day-to-day operations of schools like The Phoenix Center. However, based on my involvement thus far, I believe what truly makes The Phoenix Center special is its humanity. It is not just a school; it is a community where every success, no matter how small, is celebrated. The collaboration between teachers, therapists, and families is extraordinary, creating an environment of unity and shared purpose that you can feel the moment you walk through the doors. What also stands out is the school's genuine culture of care. The Phoenix Center does not just serve students; it supports families, builds confidence, and nurtures joy.



**Franklin (Frank)**

**Barbosa, Jr.**

Counsel; Schenck, Price, Smith & King, LLP

### DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE TPC SCHOOL TRADITION OR ACTIVITY?

Because I am still new to the Board, I have not yet had the opportunity to participate in any of The Phoenix Center's events. That said, I am very much looking forward to attending several of the Family Night Outs and meeting the students and their families.

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

I hope that both the students and their families leave The Phoenix Center with a deep sense of confidence - confidence in the students' ability to navigate the world with strength and purpose. Just as importantly, I hope they remember that they are never alone. The Phoenix Center community will always stand behind them, offering support, encouragement, and a shared pride in everything they continue to accomplish.

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

One thing many people do not know about me is that I hold a black belt in both Tae Kwon Do and Jiu-Jitsu. Martial arts were a major part of my developmental years and taught me valuable lessons in discipline, patience, and focus, lessons that carry over into my work and daily life. I will admit I cannot quite kick as high as I used to, but thankfully, the other positive impacts of martial arts on my life have not faded nearly as fast as my flexibility.

# OUR LONGEST TENURED STAFFERS!

Here are what some of them had to say when we asked:  
*What is your favorite part of working for TPC?*

**"The pride and joy on our students' faces when they succeed at a task. Make a connection with a staff member and experience magical moments that they may only get at TPC."**

**KATIE PASSAROTTI. PRINCIPAL**

**"After over 30 years at TPC, I have many favorites! But what is dearest to me is the camaraderie among the staff, the clear focus on our students' abilities, and the love and care shown for the families."**

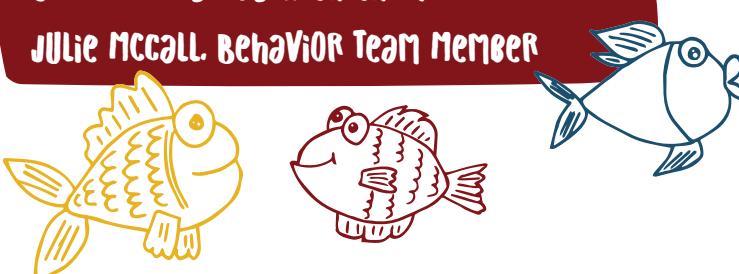
**JULIE MOWER. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**"Building meaningful connections with students and celebrating their progress—no matter how big or small. I love being part of a team that fosters inclusion and helps students develop independence, communication & self-advocacy skills!"**

**TRACY HANNA. TRANSITION SUPERVISOR**

**"After over three decades, hasn't changed: sharing connections with our students—some of the most fantastic people on the planet and we get to spend every day with them."**

**JULIE MCCALL. BEHAVIOR TEAM MEMBER**



**"Working with the most talented group of professionals!"**

**AMY BOLLIGER. UNIT SUPERVISOR**

**"TPC has been my home away from home for over 20 years. I'm so grateful for the amazing teachers and coworkers I get to work with, and I love helping the students everyday."**

**LISA PANCARO. PARAPROFESSIONAL**

**• "I can make a lasting impact on students' lives by helping them grow and succeed."**

**ISABEL COSME. CURRICULUM SPECIALIST**

**"BEING ABLE TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF THE STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES BY SUPPORTING THEM AND HELPING THEM TO PROGRESS TOWARD THEIR GOALS."**

**Vikki Raider. School Social Worker**

**"MY FAVORITE PART OF WORKING AT TPC IS THE PEOPLE I WORK WITH. MANY OF US HAVE GROWN INTO A FAMILY THAT CARES ABOUT ONE ANOTHER. THIS, IN TURN, IMPACTS HOW WE CARE FOR OUR STUDENTS. WE WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM, BRAINSTORMING WITH RESPECT FOR EACH OTHER'S VOICES AND IDEAS."**

**Tanya Taibl. Intake Coordinator**

**"I LOVE THE REACTION FROM THE STUDENTS TO THE MANY DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES THEY HAVE HERE. WHETHER IT'S COMPLETING THE TURKEY TROT, RIDING A HORSE OR HAVING THEIR FIRST JOB; THEIR SMILES ARE EVERYTHING!"**

**Jeanine Zatorski. CBI/SE Program Manager**

**"THE ABILITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF OUR STUDENTS AND TO WITNESS THEIR GROWTH AND RESILIENCE."**

**Marie Wyatt. Head Paraprofessional**

**"MY FAVORITE PART OF WORKING AT TPC IS THE COLLABORATION—LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER AND UNDERSTANDING EACH STUDENT THROUGH OUR UNIQUE LENSES. THAT SHARED PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMS HOW WE SUPPORT OUR STUDENTS."**

**Christine Hartz. Speech Therapist**

**"MY FAVORITE PART OF WORKING AT TPC IS BEING SURROUNDED BY SUCH WARM, SUPPORTIVE, AND GENUINELY FRIENDLY STAFF WHO MAKE EVERY DAY FEEL WELCOMING AND COLLABORATIVE. I ABSOLUTELY LOVE OUR STUDENTS, AND IT'S INCREDIBLY REWARDING TO WATCH AND CELEBRATE THEIR GROWTH EACH YEAR."**

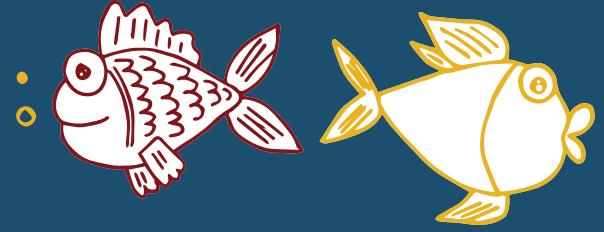
**Karen Gordon. Speech Therapist**

## **TPC HOSTED A WORKSHOP FEATURING DR. TEMPLE GRANDIN, DR. JED BAKER AND DR. JIM BALL**

On December 11th, The Phoenix Center was honored to be the host site for a special in-person Autism Conference featuring three of the most respected voices in the field: Dr. Temple Grandin, Dr. James Ball, and Dr. Jed Baker with the help of Future Horizons.

Attendees had the unique opportunity to learn from these world-renowned experts, covering cutting-edge information and practical strategies for supporting individuals on the autism spectrum. The Phoenix Center community is so grateful to board member Dr. Jim Ball for making this incredible connection.





## New Leadership. Same Heart Nutley Kia Returns as Title Sponsor

The Phoenix Center is thrilled to announce that Nutley Kia has secured the lead position as the Triple Crown Title Sponsor for our 35th Anniversary Gala on May 2, 2026.

This year's sponsorship marks an exciting new chapter. Following the dealership's acquisition by **Joseph Catalanotto** and Generation Auto Group, Nutley Kia has demonstrated that while leadership has changed, their commitment to the community remains steadfast.

By immediately stepping up as our Title Sponsor, Joseph and his team have sent a powerful message: they are dedicated to supporting our students and continuing the legacy of "excellence" that Nutley Kia is known for.

"We are proud to have Nutley Kia in the winner's circle with us," said Julie Mower, Executive Director of The Phoenix Center. "Their continued partnership ensures we can provide the innovative programming and therapeutic support our students need to thrive in life beyond the classroom." Please join us in welcoming Joseph Catalanotto to our community and thanking the entire Nutley Kia team for driving our mission forward!



## TPC is hiring... We Need TEACHERS!

We are currently seeking Special Education Teachers, Instructional Paraprofessionals, and Part-time Bus Drivers to join our team and make a difference!

By joining us, you will be part of an award-winning team and perform meaningful work in a culture that welcomes innovation, encourages creative expression, and offers limitless potential for personal and professional growth.

One of the components of our program that make us standout is our culture and Fish is at the core of it. The Phoenix Center has been practicing the Fish philosophy since 2002. This philosophy focuses on four principles – choose your attitude, make someone's day, be present and play.

Strengthening trust, teamwork and engagement is so important in building staff culture. Practicing this philosophy helps TPC foster a work environment in which everyone chooses to bring energy, passion and a positive attitude to work. As a result, 35% of staff have been with us for 10+ years! **Remember we have a staff referral program!**

Contact Deborah Brandell, MBA, SPHR, Human Resources Manager at [DBrandell@thephoenixcenternj.org](mailto:DBrandell@thephoenixcenternj.org).





PREPARING STUDENTS FOR  
**LIFE BEYOND THE  
CLASSROOM**

*est. 1991*

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# SAVE the Date

**Saturday, MAY 2, 2026**  
**TPC's 35th ANNIVERSARY GALA**  
Macaluso's  
55 4th Ave, Hawthorne, NJ 07506

