

Preparing students for



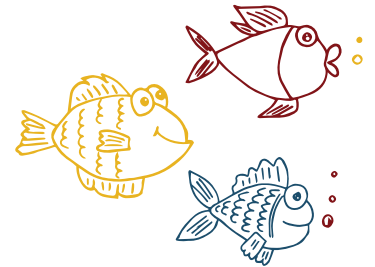
SUMMER 2026:
35TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

CELEBRATING
35 YEARS
OF EXCELLENCE

est. 1991

life beyond the classroom

FOCUS ON PHOENIX



What's iNside



35 YEARS OF STORIES -
ONE REMARKABLE SCHOOL



ANNE AND JIM RUSSOMANO



JEFF HECKER



BETH PSOTA-MIELE



SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBER

A MESSAGE FROM the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Phoenix Center Family,

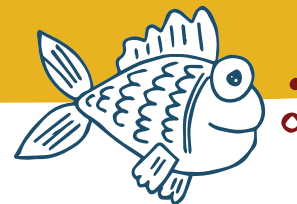
Oh, what a night... Our 35th Anniversary Triple Crown Gala was everything we hoped it would be, and then some! Being surrounded by so many people who love TPC and believe in our students made it truly unforgettable.

We were so proud to honor Anne and Board President, Jim Russomano, whose advocacy and generosity have helped shape who we are. Jeff Hecker, whose dedication as both a board member and Phoenix Center alumni parent speaks for itself. Longtime staff member, Beth Anne Psota-Miele, our surprise honoree, who embodies the heart and spirit of everything TPC stands for, was also included.

None of this happens without all of you. To our sponsors, our donors, our families, our staff, and everyone who attended, bid, donated, and cheered...thank you! Your support goes directly to the programs that make The Phoenix Center extraordinary: from our sensory environments, our Funtronic interactive floor system, to our vocational and life skills programs to name just a few. These and so many other robust offerings are what make The Phoenix Center so special.

We celebrated 35 years. Now we build the next 35.

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.

35 Years of Stories – One Remarkable School

How a simple belief in students' potential became 35 years of innovation, community, and life-changing impact

It started with a 3 by 5 index card...

In the fall of 1990, two educators with a shared conviction began writing down what their ideal school might look like. They believed every child deserves a school designed for them. Nine months later, The Phoenix Center opened its doors with 16 students, two founders who had mortgaged their own homes to make it happen, and a mission that has never wavered: to care for, educate, and empower students so they may develop life-centered skills that prepare them for life beyond the classroom.

That is where our story begins. And what a story it has been!

This year, as we celebrate our 35th anniversary, we have been sharing the stories behind the programs, milestones, and moments that helped shape The Phoenix Center. While each story is unique, they all trace back to a simple belief that continues to guide us today: every student has gifts, abilities, and untapped potential waiting to be discovered.

For 35 years, we have focused on what students **can** do, not what they can't.

Along the way, The Phoenix Center has remained committed to providing individualized, research-based programs that meet students where they are while helping them grow toward greater independence. Guided by our mission and strengthened by our Fish! Philosophy of choosing your attitude, being present, playing, and making someone's day, we continue to create an environment where students, families, and staff can thrive together.

While much has changed over the past 35 years, one thing remains exactly the same: our belief in what is possible for every student who walks through our doors.

The Phoenix Center's official 35th anniversary is September 2026, and we plan to keep celebrating all the way there and beyond. We invite you to continue following along as we share the stories, milestones, and moments that have defined our first 35 years and will help shape the next 35!

Scan or click the code to start with Story #1, where it all began, and follow the links at the bottom of each story to continue the journey.



ANNE & JIM RUSSOMANO

22 YEARS OF SUPPORT & CONTRIBUTION

Some of the most meaningful relationships begin with a simple question. More than two decades ago, Jim Russomano picked up the phone and asked three words that would greatly impact The Phoenix Center: "Who are you guys?"

Anne and Jim owned the Nutley Kia dealership just around the corner from TPC and their fleet service relationship was already in place. But Jim was curious about the school he kept hearing about, and that call sparked something neither side could have predicted. What started as a neighborly inquiry evolved into a profound partnership that has quite literally changed the landscape of The Phoenix Center.

Over the years that followed, Anne and Jim became more than supporters. They became part of the fabric of the school! Their contributions, totaling more than \$146,000, have left a visible mark on TPC in ways that touch students and staff every single day. The vehicles that carry students to community-based instruction and employment sites. The shade structures on the playground where children have room to run and just be kids. And Anne's personal contribution of her design talents to renovate the teaching kitchen, creating an elevated, functional space where students can develop real cooking skills and kitchen independence.

In 2016, Julie and Dr. Gibbia asked Jim to join the Board of Directors. He said yes without hesitation. By 2021, he had stepped into the role of Board President, where he continues to serve as a steady, trusted voice for the school.



Anne and Jim Russomano are, in every sense of the word, a cornerstone. Not because of the dollars or the titles, but because when The Phoenix Center needed people who would show up quietly and consistently, year after year, they were there.

JEFF HECKER

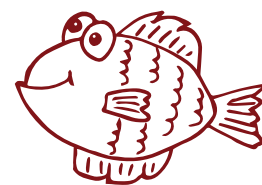
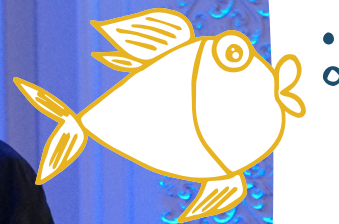
FROM PHOENIX CENTER ALUMNI PARENT TO LIFELONG ADVOCATE

Jeff Hecker's connection to The Phoenix Center began the way it does for so many families: with a child, a hope, and a leap of faith!

In early 2008, Jeff's daughter Erin joined TPC as a 10-year-old just beginning to find her footing. Over the next eleven years, the school and the Hecker family became true partners, working side by side toward a shared mission: helping Erin discover her confidence, work through her challenges, and reach her full potential. It was the kind of school-home partnership that TPC was built to create, and it worked. Today, Erin is a 28-year-old young woman who loves going to the movies, attending Broadway shows, and spending time with her grandfather, who she talks to every day.

Most families mark graduation as a closing chapter. For Jeff, when Erin graduated in 2019, it was the beginning of something more.

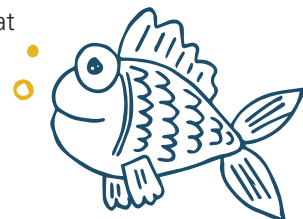
That same year, Jeff joined TPC's Board of Directors, stepping into a leadership role that has grown more meaningful with every passing year. His work on the Fundraising Committee has opened doors the school could not have opened on its own, generating donations, event connections, and raffle contributions that have directly supported programs and students.



He and his family, including his niece Ava, have contributed more than \$17,000 to TPC since that first leap of faith back in 2008.

What Jeff gives, though, goes beyond what any number can capture. He brings the perspective of a parent who has seen TPC's mission work firsthand, and that belief has a way of moving people. Every connection he makes, every hour he volunteers, carries the weight of someone who knows exactly what is at stake for the families walking through those doors.

Jeff's commitment is a reminder that the impact of The Phoenix Center does not end at graduation. For some, that is where it truly begins.



Beth Psota-Miele

35 YEARS OF DEDICATION

When The Phoenix Center opened its doors in 1991, Beth Psota-Miele was there.

Fresh out of college, she joined the school in its very first year and has never left. Over the 35 years since, her role has grown and deepened in ways that mirror the school's own evolution. Today she serves as a teacher, Behavior Coordinator, and manages all TPC's IT, a role that only begins to define what she actually is to this community.

Beth was selected as a surprise honoree at our 35th Anniversary Gala, and the surprise element was fitting. She is not someone who does this work for recognition. She has simply shown up, year after year, decade after decade, and made the school better in so many ways!

Her educational philosophy, shaped by 35 years of teaching our students, is built on a few truths that sound simple but take a career to truly learn: that behavior is communication, that nonverbal does not mean unaware, that consistency and structure are the foundations of trust, and that progress looks different for every child, but it is always worth celebrating. Those convictions recently reached a wider audience when NorthJersey.com published her opinion piece, "[What My Students With Autism Have Taught Me](#)," a reflection that brought her perspective to families and educators far beyond the walls of TPC.

But for those who work alongside Beth, no article was needed. They already know.

When Beth accepted her award at the gala, she spoke about what keeps her going after 35 years in a field that asks a great deal of the people in it. She talked about the staff, about the



culture they have built together, about the fact that on the hard days, which come without warning in this work, there is always someone to lean on. Someone to ask for help. A community of people who carry each other through, because what they are doing is worth it.

That is not something that happens by accident. It is built by the people who have been there long enough to set the tone, and Beth has been setting it since the beginning.

The Phoenix Center was founded on the belief that every student has gifts, abilities, and untapped potential waiting to be discovered. Beth Psota-Miele has spent 35 years living that belief out, one student, one family, one hard day at a time.

TRIPLE CROWN Gala

Thank YOU TPC community

Our 35th Anniversary Triple Crown Gala was everything we hoped it would be and so much more. The derby attire was fabulous, the energy was electric, and the spirit in that room was unmistakably TPC.

It truly takes a village, and what a village we have. To our sponsors, our donors, our guests, our honorees, and everyone who supported this evening in any way, near or far, thank you. Your generosity directly supports our students and the programs that help them grow, thrive, and prepare for life beyond the classroom. Here's to the next 35 years!



SPOTLIGHT ON BOARD MEMBER

A CONVERSATION WITH MAYRA PASTORE

HOW DID YOU FIRST COME TO THE PHOENIX CENTER?

My son Daniel was leaving elementary school, and my town wanted to place him in the middle school. But he didn't belong in a school with 900 kids. So I did my own research, and another family told me about The Phoenix Center. When I walked in, I knew! I didn't need anything else. He was there until he graduated in 2019.

WHAT MADE YOU CONFIDENT THE PUBLIC SCHOOL WASN'T THE RIGHT FIT?

They were starting a program, and I didn't want him to be part of an unestablished program. At The Phoenix Center, the kids are out in the community, getting real support. Daniel is nonverbal, so he needed consistent, one-on-one care. In 10 years, he had only three teachers, all of them spectacular. They laid the foundation for things we never thought he'd do: going to a restaurant, using a device to communicate. I'm very grateful.

WHAT DO YOU THINK SEPARATES TPC FROM OTHER SCHOOLS?

Consistency. In his earlier years, therapists would turn over constantly. By the time I knew who they were, they were gone. At The Phoenix Center, if he had a speech therapist, that person stayed. And to me, as someone from the business world, staff longevity speaks volumes. These are hard jobs, so you have to love what you do. The fact that people stay 5, 10, 20 years says everything. That starts at the top.

HOW DID YOU END UP ON THE BOARD?

The year Daniel graduated, Dr. G and Julie stopped me on my way in and said, "You're going to be on the board, right?" I said, I guess so. You don't say no to Dr. G. It was gratitude, maybe a little fear, but I've been on the board since 2019.

"it was life-changing for my son."

- Mayra Pastore.
BOARD MEMBER & ALUMNI PARENT



WHAT'S THAT EXPERIENCE BEEN LIKE?

Really positive. I've learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes, especially around finances, and I happily serve as board treasurer.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE TPC TRADITION?

The concerts. These kids, these young adults, get up and perform. Can they sing every word? No. But they participate. They're part of it. And the staff makes that happen. I also love being part of Partners in Caring and organizing the staff appreciation luncheon.

WHAT IS SOMETHING VERY FEW PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT YOU?

I like to needlepoint and cross stitch. I find the process very relaxing. I love that when I am done, the final product really looks like the image on the package. It is a feeling of accomplishment.

WE'RE HIRING!

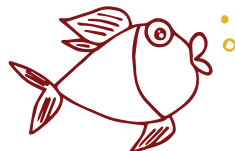
HELP US SPREAD THE WORD

The Phoenix Center is actively seeking Classroom Teachers, Paraprofessionals, and Nurses for the 2026–2027 school year, and we are hoping you can help us find them.

Do you know someone who is passionate about working with students with autism and multiple disabilities? Someone who is looking for a school where they will feel supported, inspired, and genuinely valued? Please share this with them. The right people are out there, and sometimes they just need someone to point them in the right direction.

At TPC, new team members join a community that has been practicing the Fish Philosophy since 2002, where 35% of staff have been here for 10 or more years. That kind of longevity does not happen by accident. It happens because this is a place where people love what they do and who they do it with.

Know someone who would be a great fit? [Share the flyer](#) via the QR code, or send them to thephoenixcenternj.org to learn more and apply today.





PREPARING STUDENTS FOR
**LIFE BEYOND THE
CLASSROOM**

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DID YOU KNOW

We're Going Digital!

After this issue, The Phoenix Center newsletter will be delivered primarily through email and our website.

Why the change? Going digital allows us to share stories more frequently, reduce printing and mailing costs, and direct more resources toward the programs and services that benefit our students.

To continue receiving updates, stories, event announcements, and news from The Phoenix Center, please scan or click the QR code and submit your preferred email address.

Don't miss a thing as we continue celebrating 35 years of excellence and building the next 35 years together!

—scan here—

