



Preparing students for

life beyond the classroom

FOCUS ON PHOENIX

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**CASINO NIGHT
ROCKED THE
HOUSE!**



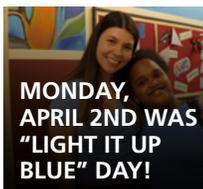
**THE HELPING
HANDS OF
NOVARTIS**



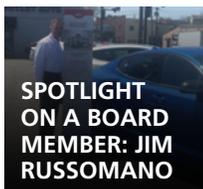
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**SPOTLIGHT
ON A BOARD
MEMBER: JIM
RUSSOMANO**

It is with heartfelt sadness that The Phoenix Center announces that one of our students, Ryan W., passed away. He was an amazing spirit with a true love of life, and he will be profoundly missed. Our deepest condolences go out to his family and friends.



A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



As I look back at this past school year—the conclusion of my second year as Executive Director—I marvel at how quickly time has gone by. It has been another very busy, engaging, and blessed year for all of us at The Phoenix Center. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank every one of you for your individual contributions, whether in time, donations, partnerships, sponsorships—or all of these. You enable our program to be as exceptional as it is. I am also

grateful to have a dedicated staff and wonderful Board members, who support us all year long. Our accomplishments and expertise have not gone unnoticed by the press; since our last newsletter, we have been featured on NJ101.5 radio, NJTV, and CBS Morning News!

I'd like to send a special note of thanks to our staunch supporters, Knights of York, and to devoted Board member Jim Russomano, Dealer and Principal of Nutley Kia. Jim is featured later on in this issue as a part of our new column called **Spotlight on a Board Member**, which will be in every newsletter moving forward. We will also be featuring a student or donor in each issue so you can get to know the faces in our learning community—those who partner with us to help make The Phoenix Center the special place that it is.

Please enjoy your summer and feel free to reach out to me directly if there is a topic, an individual, or an organization that you would like us to feature. We look forward to seeing you in September and creating another fabulous year together. Until then, be well, be safe, 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.



On Friday, April 27th, our Annual Casino Night fundraiser was another great success! Attendance was about 150 people, with 10 sponsors, 43 prizes, and 20 silent auction items that resulted in nearly \$50,000 of funding for The Friends of The Phoenix Center Foundation!

What an amazing night this was! Our annual Casino Night fundraiser was another huge success! In large part, our title sponsor **Knights of York** helped to make this event possible. In addition, we were fortunate to have **De Meola Zawacki Mingione & Co., LLC**, and **Inserra Supermarkets** as our High Roller sponsors; **Railroad Construction** as our Pit Boss sponsor; **Columbia Bank**, **JB Autism Consulting**, **Delta Marliff**, and **Partners in Caring** as our Beginners' Luck sponsors; **Doherty Enterprises (Shannon Rose, Spuntino and Chevy's)** as our Dining sponsors; and **Andy's Corner Bar** as our Beverage sponsor.

Because many programs The Phoenix Center offers are not covered by tuition dollars (i.e., Consumer Family Life Skills, Community-Based Instruction, Horticulture, Pet Therapy,

and Horseback Riding, as well as our Leisure and Recreation programs) they, among other programs, will all benefit from this fundraiser.

Thank you all for sponsoring, attending, contributing to, and working at the event! The efforts and contributions of our Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers are so very appreciated. I'd like to acknowledge our Casino Committee, comprised of staff, community members, parents, and Board members listed below. ■

CASINO COMMITTEE

Jonathan Andolino, Barbara Chiarieri, Elizabeth Copti, Jeff Hecker, Leon Morton, Julie Mower, Mayra Pastore, Marc Restaino, Andrew Schuck, Carolyn Sharaway, Kerry Vara-Landolfi, Kim Wynbeek



THE HELPING HANDS OF NOVARTIS: MAKING CASINO NIGHT POSSIBLE!

Sinead Kelly, coordinator of the six Novartis volunteers who helped us decorate and set up for our Casino Night, states, "Novartis CEO (Vas Narasimhan) has challenged all associates to give back to society more than we take, and our Community Partnership Day (CPD) is one way we can give back. Employees are given the opportunity to spend a volunteer day at a number of approved organizations. Members of Novartis were humbled to have the opportunity to volunteer for the third year in a row at The Phoenix Center in support of preparations for Casino Night. The day's activities involved transforming the gym into a festive venue to host a night of food and fun for all!" ■

The Novartis associates in the above photo, from left to right (all wearing white volunteer shirts) are Kevin Lombardi, Halina Czyn, Maria Rolo, Patty Lam-Vo, Damonique Murray, and Lisa Hannon.

VOICES IN HARMONY

On March 4th, Bergen Performing Arts Center, ASAH, The Alliance of Private Special Education Schools of North Jersey, and William T. Morris Foundation presented *Voices in Harmony*, a musical celebration featuring 16 schools for exceptional students from all over the New Jersey area. The Phoenix Center was proud to have ten students (Alexis, Amani, Azeem, Christian, Eric, Erin, Isabella, Lindsay, Rosie, and Zion) represent us in this wonderful performance. Here are a few words from our event partners:

"This event gives the students a beautiful platform to express themselves and become stars for the day and provides them with an experience for a lifetime," said Alexander Diaz, Creative Director at The Performing Arts School at Bergen Performing Arts Center.

"*Voices In Harmony* is an incredibly inspiring and uplifting event. From parents, students, and audience members, I truly believe it changes everyone who witnesses this performance. These students truly have no limits and have the ability to inspire us all," said Gerrilynn Guerrero, Education Outreach Manager at The Performing Arts School at Bergen Performing Arts Center. ■



JULIE MOWER FEATURED ON CBS NEW YORK SHOW

We're so proud of Executive Director Julie Mower! If you missed her LIVE on Saturday, April 21st, on CBS New York with Cindy Hsu TV and Andrea Grymes, you can see her at <https://cbsloc.al/2IWfC63>, providing helpful tips for parents in honor of Autism Awareness Month! Julie, you're such an incredible advocate for our students! ■



MONDAY, APRIL 2ND, WAS "LIGHT IT UP BLUE" DAY!

April was World Autism Month, and on Monday, April 2nd, The Phoenix Center staff, friends, families, and supporters kicked off the month in their "favorite blue" to show their support! If you missed Light It Up Blue this year, be sure to mark your calendars for next April 2nd and show us your BLUE on our Facebook page in support of Autism Awareness. ■

SPOTLIGHT ON A BOARD MEMBER: JIM RUSSOMANO



This piece is the first of our new series, *Spotlight on a Board Member*. In this issue, we are featuring Jim Russomano, Dealer and Principal of Nutley Kia, just down the road from The Phoenix Center! We caught up with Jim on a beautiful spring day and asked him about how he came to know The Phoenix Center and, ultimately, become a Board member. Jim explained, “The beginning of our relationship was very transactional. Before 2011, our dealership provided parts and service for their trucks and vans. After my wife, Anne, handled a few of the school vehicles in Service, she asked, ‘What and where is The Phoenix Center?’ I contacted then Executive Director, Dr. Gibbia, and we sat down to talk about

the school vehicles and the school overall. It surprised me, despite being a veteran of the Nutley Chamber of Commerce and being around the corner, that I, and almost all of my colleagues in our 200-person Chamber, knew little about this wonderful school and the work that they do. ‘WHY doesn’t anyone know about you? People need to know that you are serving over 140 students from 61 districts...and from ages 5-21. This is amazing’.

“Unless you personally see what goes on within those four walls, you cannot fully appreciate the work that is being done there. It is mind blowing. They do God’s work. That experience began the journey Anne and I have taken with the school; here we feel like we can make a difference. We have been sponsor/donors for the last six years, and I have been on the Board for two. My future focus is going to be helping the leadership and the Board look at the school with a business lens and look pragmatically at our operations, funding, donor support, outreach, and ultimately, our future. Anne and I have committed to a multi-year planned-giving campaign that could be a great model for other sponsors and donors.” ■



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Thank you all in advance for your contributions to our Annual Appeal. Please visit our website and click on “[Donate](#)”.