

# OUTLOOK



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

## TAKING THE TIME TO APPRECIATE OUR WONDERFUL STAFF

### *A Mother's Letter of Thanks*

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*Dear Brooke and Pat,  
I hope this finds you well. I write today to share with you our deepest appreciation for the great work the team at Dryden Road did with Sensen the past couple of days.*



*Sensen, pictured with his mom, lives at Racker Centers' Dryden Road residential group home.*

*You may have learned that Sensen had two episodes of grand mal like seizures Monday afternoon. He was transferred to the ER in an ambulance and spent two nights at Cayuga Medical Center before being discharged Wednesday morning.*

*These episodes of seizure were not only Sensen's very first, but also the first the majority (if not everyone) of the Dryden Road staff have ever witnessed. Despite the intensity of the experience for these young ladies, they responded to the call of duty with sound judgment,*

*admirable courage and compassion, and superb teamwork that ensured Sensen's safety and our sanity.*

*I understand that Briana and Kathryn were among the ones at the scene when the seizures took place. They were quick to orient Sensen to a safe posture and with Jane's support coordinated the ambulance transfer as timely as they could. Emily was the one who accompanied Sensen to the ER and later spent much "quality time" with Sensen and I on the Pediatric Floor during his stay in the hospital. Her loving presence and positive energy was not only reassuring to Sensen but also tremendously valuable to my husband and me. Having just arrived back late the night before Sensen's seizures, from two weeks of intense business travels in Asia, I could not have imagined surviving the past couple of days without Emily's generosity; sharing her time, assistance, and smiles. Entertaining Sensen for several hours on a hospital floor (so mom could get some sleep) is no small accomplishment.*

*Continued on page 3...*



Executive Director Dan Brown

In this Outlook and our others, we highlight the successes that people with disabilities and their families experience, as well as the goals they reach. These achievements are surely something to celebrate. These stories also reflect the great work our staff does in supporting individuals and their families. In this Outlook we will focus not only on the achievements and successes of those we support, but also take a moment to appreciate the hard, dedicated and skilled work done by our staff.

We are lucky and grateful that families often take the time to share their feedback and experiences from working with our staff. I recently asked our staff to share some of the feedback received from families and the individuals that we support. Here are a few quotes from those letters:

*My son is able to live independently because of the services coordinated by Racker Centers. This is HUGELY important and MUCH appreciated!*

*I cannot thank you enough for everything that your team has done for my child. I truly believe it takes a village, not just one person. My child has been blessed to have such amazing support in his life. I will forever be grateful!!!*

*I just wanted to say thank you for the hard work, for the care you offer and attempt to offer my son, for the feedback, for out-of-the box thinking, for patience and persistence, for your team effort and experience, and for coming back the next day to do it all over again!*

*My son has grown so much toward reaching goals we thought were never possible and we owe it all to the Racker Centers Supporting Success Program.*

*The Racker Centers staff member that works with my daughter is like an angel from heaven, seriously. She shows up in such a good mood, always positive and full of energy, which is just what our daughter needs. With her graduation from high school and with no place to go (no placement at Challenge or at Unity House), she gets pretty bored hanging out with me or going and sitting at work with dad. Your staff has gone above and beyond to work more with her during this difficult transition in services and I can't tell you how much we appreciate it.*

*The staff members that work with my son have been instrumental in making it possible for him to live in his own apartment – learning to shop, cook, do laundry and clean house without his parents having to intervene constantly. His social skills are improving, and his Community Support Staff have helped him broaden his world view. His Medicaid Service Coordinator has helped him and us be aware of and access a myriad of resources, including financial aid, that we'd have NEVER found on our own!*

*It was a Racker Centers person who first put "out there" the idea of residential – an idea that today seems like a no-brainer. That's how it works. Without your saying it and framing it, the rest might not be happening; and we might not have the hope and new vision that keeps our imagination going for our son.*

*I wanted to share with you that yesterday our son was having a difficult time settling into an activity so he sat down in front of our refrigerator and got very quiet. He was looking at the two class pictures we have of his class from the Racker Centers. I sat down with him and he was very teary and said multiple times how much he misses you. We decided to print out one of the pictures we have from his graduation...so he can have it when he is thinking of you. Needless to say I was in tears as well!*

In closing, how good we are as an organization is how good our people are. You can see from these few comments from families and the individuals that we support that we have GREAT staff. If you have a story you'd like to share, or would just like to join us in saying "Thank You" to our staff, help us celebrate their work by going to the Racker Centers Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/Franziskarackercenters](http://www.facebook.com/Franziskarackercenters)) and post your experiences there.

Please enjoy reading some other feedback from families throughout the rest of this publication, as well as hear from some of our staff directly about their work here at Racker Centers.

Sincerely,

**For a list of current members of our Board of Directors visit the ABOUT US link at [www.rackercenters.org](http://www.rackercenters.org)**

## 2014's NATIONAL DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION WEEK IS SEPTEMBER 7<sup>TH</sup>-13<sup>TH</sup>

This nationally designated week celebrates and honors the thousands of professional staff who support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities as they work to achieve their goals for success and happiness. At Racker Centers it is important for us to celebrate and honor our staff that provide direct support to individuals with disabilities; this includes therapists, clinicians, classroom staff, counselors, service coordinators, staff in our homes and our staff that work in the community. Our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) work in all areas of our community, supporting people of every age where they live, work, and play. The support provided by these dedicated individuals often makes it possible for people with disabilities to live in their own homes, work in



community jobs, and participate in civic life. Strengths are reinforced and celebrated and many new skills are taught. Direct Support Professionals provide guidance and teaching in the areas of finance and banking, transportation and travel training, social skills and relationship development, self-care and personal responsibility. Without the work of DSPs, the lives of hundreds of people with developmental disabilities in our community would be drastically different. Direct Support Professional Recognition week is a community-wide opportunity to say thank you to those individuals working every day

to help people with disabilities lead meaningful lives.

Dan Brown states, "Direct Support Professionals ARE our most important resource. Their dedication, caring attitude and generosity are what make our organization successful."



**WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN US IN SAYING "THANK YOU" TO OUR STAFF?**

**Share your experiences by going to Racker Centers Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/Franziskarackercenters](http://www.facebook.com/Franziskarackercenters) and posting your stories!**

### A Mother's Letter, continued from cover...

*Andrea, the residential nurse, and Jane, the Team Director, did an excellent job notifying us in a timely fashion, keeping the information flowing openly and candidly, ensuring a mutually trusting and supportive communication channel which was key in safeguarding Sensen's health and well-being during this very stressful and overwhelming time. They were also thoughtful and proactive in updating operational plans related to staffing under various circumstances and medicine administration. Andrea was particularly helpful in seeking clarification of medical advice and Jane was very considerate in offering to organize extra staffing so BOCES, where Sensen attends school, could have some time to put a sound plan in place in anticipation of this new development. To have Andrea and Kathryn with us for Sensen's follow-up doctor visit was quite reassuring. To know that Dryden Rd. staff will be accompanying us to the pediatric neurologist visit in Rochester adds much peace of mind, not only because we will have the extra hands/minds on-site but also to know that the group home is truly committed to continuity and consistency of information and care every step of the way.*

*Despite the fact that everyone had to operate under elaborate (and necessary) institutional guidelines and constraints of competing priorities in their personal and professional lives, the team's caring approach and respectful communication made them exemplary ambassadors of the agency; we did not for one moment feel an unwelcome burden or that we were being subjected to bureaucratic red tape of any sort, a delicate boundary to navigate especially when staff must also be stretched fairly thin. Throughout the incident, the team conveyed a great sense of honesty as well as care and compassion for Sensen and for us as a family, which is critical and valuable in a time of uncertainty.*

*We still don't know what may have caused these episodes of seizures; we pray that Sensen will not have to go through this traumatizing experience ever again. We are grateful that our little one was surrounded by good, loving people when it did happen.*

Respectfully,  
**Hongnan and Shijie**

## Margaret and Mary Ann by Melissa Kiser

Any mention of developmental disabilities conjures different images for different people. For some, it's an uncomfortable moment in the grocery store with a noisy stranger and for others it's a challenging reality of everyday life. For Margaret, a residential direct support professional at Racker Centers, it's an unwavering story of growth, hope and opportunity. "When I first met Mary Ann, I was told she didn't have any interests. She didn't like to do anything, didn't want anything. But I didn't believe that." Margaret's first words about Mary Ann were touching, but filled with true sentiment. "For a long time, Mary Ann just sat there in her wheelchair... she didn't even look at us." Two short years later, Mary Ann is smiling, laughing, running and having meaningful exchanges with people she would have considered strangers – or inconveniences – not that long ago.



Mary Ann came to the Racker Centers' residential program from another agency where she lived practically her entire life. In 2012, Racker Centers had a residential opening and was able to offer Mary Ann a placement at a home in Trumansburg, NY. She came to Racker Centers with very little – just a few simple belongings, mementos and the memories of a way of life that she had known for so long and grown so accustomed to. Mary Ann moved to the East Seneca group home, a home with 10 residents supported by Racker Centers, and was reconnected with her sister who had resided there for a number of years. It was then that her transformation began. "When she first moved in she didn't speak to us and didn't smile. She just sat in her chair..." Margaret recalls. Those first few months when Mary Ann moved in were quiet and almost chilling, "There was so much that we wanted to do for her, but we couldn't figure out what she wanted. Within a year after her arrival Mary Ann experienced a difficult loss – her mother passed away.

Margaret started taking Mary Ann to parks, movies and getting her music to listen to at home. Staff worked with her to discover her likes and dislikes. "Oh, she doesn't like the movies at all! She falls asleep every time," Margaret states cheerfully, "but she sure likes it when Michael brings his guitar and plays for her. She rocks and sways and we know she's having a good time." Margaret slowly figured out what Mary Ann liked and built on those interests. Before long, Mary Ann was active in the community and regularly pursued her new interests.

Noting that there were no health concerns to hamper her progress, staff first assisted Mary Ann to get to know her surroundings. She was supported while walking because prior to Mary Ann moving in staff were told that she walked approximately 100 feet and would then give up and preferred to be left in her wheelchair. Today Margaret proudly notes that Mary Ann can now walk (and run) for as long as she desires and often prefers to be active. "We took a chance. One day, while supporting her, we removed the strap from across her in her wheelchair. She got up and just kept moving." As for the wheelchair – "Oh that thing? It's in the shed out back covered up. She doesn't need it anymore." Noting that for long trips in the community, Mary Ann will use a much lighter travel chair over uneven terrain or long distances, but the restricting large object is now a distant memory of Mary Ann's past.

Because little is known about Mary Ann's past, staff's biggest concern was that Mary Ann was unhappy. She wouldn't communicate and largely kept to herself. Approximately six months into her transition, something wonderful happened – Mary Ann began to smile, then she began to laugh. "That defining moment? The moment we knew she was happy? It was when she smiled at us. A small smile, but she smiled and we knew that everything was going to be ok. As for communicating, "She uses hand gestures, not sign language or anything like that but believe me, she lets you know when she needs something." Today, if you visit East Seneca, you can see Mary Ann, standing with others in the house and enjoying conversations. The quiet, reserved woman in the wheelchair was replaced with a happier, well-adjusted Mary Ann who actively pursues her own interests and also manages to take care of putting everyone in their place with her humor.

This is not the end of the story for Mary Ann, far from it, in fact. Margaret states, "She's still progressing. She's becoming so independent. There's still so far for her to go." When credited with her part in Mary Ann's success, Margaret humbly says that she just treats Mary Ann like family – and she wouldn't have it any other way. "Developmental disabilities aren't the end, you know? It's important to support individuals and help them get to a place where they're happy."

## EWAN'S SUCCESS STORY

In the spring of 2014 the son of Bethany Brown, Director of Human Resources here at Racker Centers, was graduating from the childcare and preschool program that he was enrolled in for the past two years. As it is for many families of little ones reaching this important milestone, it was an emotional transition for Bethany's family, but thanks to the hard work of many staff that have played an important role in Ewan's life, a very positive transition.

Below are some thoughts that Bethany shared in a letter to the many early childhood staff that worked with Ewan:



*To the evaluation team, the speech, occupational and physical therapists, the toddler daycare program staff and the preschool program staff here at Racker,*

*Ewan's last day of daycare is today. In September he begins UPK in his home school. This would have NEVER been possible without the support and expertise of each and every one of you. While he will continue his connection to Racker Centers for at least a little while longer in the fall, his time here ends today and it has been such a great experience. His skills have grown exponentially and everyone's enthusiasm and caring attitude have been greatly appreciated.*

*Every interaction I had with you reminded me of Ewan's strengths and the positive things he has to contribute to the world. I cannot put into words how lifesaving that was at times. When your child has complicated needs, all too often people talk about what is "wrong" with them. Having Ewan come here has helped my family heal from all the hurtful things we had heard, and has given us the skills to respond to them in the future in a much more productive way.*

*Again, thank you,  
Bethany L Brown*



### GREAT JOB RENEE!

Renee Zonder, Special Education Teacher, at the Tompkins County Preschool, has recently become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). This national certification requires specific coursework in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) along with 1500 hours of supervision by another BCBA and passing of a national Board examination.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER

9

8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.

FALL CELEBRATION 2014



Ithaca College Emerson Suites  
953 Danby Road, Ithaca

Join us for our annual community and staff awards ceremony as we honor recipients for their dedication and commitment to the mission and vision of Racker Centers.

*Followed by Kimberly Barthel's special keynote address:  
"Moving Beyond Labels"*

*Cost is \$25 per person and includes breakfast.  
Register online at [www.rackercenters.org](http://www.rackercenters.org) by October 2<sup>nd</sup>.*

**Contact Lauren Schler at 607-272-5891 x244 or [laurens@rackercenters.org](mailto:laurens@rackercenters.org) for more information.**

## FALL NDT 2014 CONFERENCE

All trainings will be held at Franziska Racker Centers at 3226 Wilkins Road in Ithaca, NY

Kimberly Barthel, OTR/L, C/NDT is coming to Ithaca to present a series of courses October 7, 8, and 10-12, 2014.

Courses will include:\*

**BREATHING, MOVING AND REACHING: THE RIBCAGE**

**AS A FOUNDATION FOR FUNCTION** ~ OCTOBER 7 - 8:30A.M.- 5:00P.M.

**AROUSAL, ATTENTION AND ACTION** ~ OCTOBER 8 - 8:30A.M.-5:00P.M.

**INTRODUCTION TO THE NEURO-DEVELOPMENTAL**

**TREATMENT APPROACH** ~ OCTOBER 10-12 - 9:00A.M. - 4:30P.M.

*\*Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) are available for these courses.*

*\*Early Bird Registration ends September 12<sup>th</sup>*



### ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Kim integrates the science of occupational therapy and neurobiology with cutting edge practice to support the conscious evolution of the human spirit. With 30 years of experience in the field of occupational therapy, Kim's approach to serving clients is visionary and eclectic, yet grounded and easy to integrate into your daily life.

These courses are sponsored by:



Cayuga Medical Center at Ithaca



Opening Doors...Changing Lives

For more details, email [info@rackercenters.org](mailto:info@rackercenters.org) or contact Jessica Jones at 607-272-5891 ext. 206. You can also find additional information and register online at [www.rackercenters.org/events](http://www.rackercenters.org/events).

## Maguire Dealerships Community Oil Change Benefits Racker Centers for the Second Year

Franziska Racker Centers was the recent recipient of funds donated by the Maguire Family of Dealerships for a second year as a result of their popular philanthropic program, the Community Oil Change. The program, which was started in 2013, continued for several months throughout 2014 and donated 100% of the proceeds of every \$10 oil change completed throughout all of their dealerships to a different charitable organization each month. Racker Centers is thrilled to announce that the Maguire Family of Dealerships donated a total of \$17,326 from the Community Oil change program in 2014 that will go to benefit the many supports and services provided to families and individuals with disabilities throughout the communities we serve.

*Danita Fish presents the donation to Perri LoPinto, Director of Development and Community Relations*



## Local PUSH America Chapter Makes Generous Donation



PUSH America is a 501 non-profit organization founded in 1977 through Pi Kappa Phi as a way for undergraduate fraternity brothers to experience leadership development through service of people with disabilities. The local Pi Kappa Phi fraternity PUSH America Chapter generously donated \$1,400 from funds raised at local PUSH America events. PUSH America organizes various national and local fund raising and awareness events to support and aid people with disabilities. The local group has also worked with Racker Centers in the past to build accessible ramps for home of individuals in need. Thank you PUSH America!

*Heather Hughes from Community Relations accepts the check presented by Ben Hollander and Nik Kok, Push America Chapter President.*

## STAFF MEMBER HONORED BY HUMAN SERVICES COALITION

Racker staff member Kelly Buck was honored this year at the Annual Luncheon of the Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County. Buck was awarded the Anne Tompkins Jones Award for Community Service as a Distinguished Volunteer for her work with One-to-One Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ithaca and Tompkins County. Kelly has volunteered with the organization and has mentored her adopted little sister Vanessa, on the weekends over the past five years. Kelly is the Toddler classroom teacher at Racker Centers' Tompkins County preschool and has worked at the agency for five years.

*Kelly Buck with her "Little Sister" Vanessa*



## THANK YOU Business Partners\*

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George V. and Jean A. Smith Charitable Trust  
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Tompkins Trust Company  
Triad Foundation  
United Way for Cortland County  
United Way of Tompkins County  
Wegmans Food Markets

*\* Business Partners are donors who make gifts of \$1,000 or more in support of Annual Operating costs*



United Way Member Organization

Friday, November

# 14

Partnership Program\*

10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

CELEBRATION  
and REUNION PARTY



*\*Racker Centers' Partnership Program is our specialized preschool classrooms for children on the autism spectrum.*



**RACKER CENTERS**  
Creating Opportunities for People with Special Needs

### MISSION

We are dedicated to helping people with special needs and their families have good lives, with opportunities to learn, to be responsible, to feel cared for, to share, to be connected to others. We are committed to creating a culture of inclusion in our community, celebrating the richness that diversity and interdependence bring.

### VISION

We are inspired by the vision of our founding families: that all people with disabilities will be valued members of a welcoming and supportive community.

**EDITOR** Heather Hughes, Director of Public Relations

**DESIGN** Dawn Bricen LaMorte, SUNRISE STUDIOS DESIGN [www.SunriseStudiosDesign.com](http://www.SunriseStudiosDesign.com)

**CONTRIBUTORS** Bethany Brown, Dan Brown, Heather Hughes, Melissa Kiser

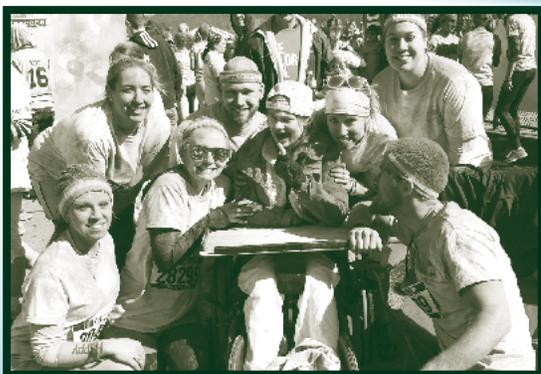
## STAFF IN ACTION AT SOME OF RACKER CENTERS' 2014 EVENTS



**Cortland Resource Fair**



**Tioga County Community Resource Fair**



**Tioga Color Run**



**Cortland Playground Build**

