

# OUTLOOK



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

## *Leaps and Bounds: Catching up with former Racker students*

*By Linda Kline, LCSW-R Preschool Social Worker*

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*Where are they now? That's the question often buzzing around the preschool hallways at Franziska Racker Centers' Preschool locations in Tompkins, Cortland and Tioga Counties. We are so fortunate to have these youngsters entrusted to our care by parents who are often more nervous than their children when they begin school at three years old. Since we begin work with the children at such a young age, we witness many changes.*

Some learn to walk, others begin speaking, and many become self-sufficient in toileting. We watch the growth and development of fine and gross motor skills, speech that transforms sometimes from unintelligible jargon to conversation with budding humor, and increased self-confidence through supporting social emotional health.

When we see the changes, we rejoice in the baby steps as well as the leaps and bounds, right along with families. Some changes we aren't lucky enough to witness, and may never see, but we believe with our hearts that we have somehow made a difference. As graduation approaches, we have to not let them go, but help move them forward into their next journey – kindergarten and big school. On the last day of school at the Tompkins County preschool, it is a tradition for the staff to congregate out by the bus circle. As the children go round and round in the buses, we wave, jump up and down, and shout "Have fun in kindergarten!" As fun and joyful as this is, it doesn't mean there aren't a few stray tears being wiped away. We know we will adore the next group of children coming in, but we have grown attached and will miss each and every child. So, where are they now? A few former students were interviewed, and here's what they're up to.



*Truman*

*Continued on page 4...*

# Office for People With Developmental Disabilities' (OPWDD) Transformation Plan

Recently Racker Centers, along with many self-advocates, families, and service providers, had an opportunity to share our ideas with the NYS Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) about its plan to increase employment opportunities and to provide additional options for people with disabilities to have meaningful things to do each day. Feedback on the plan highlighted the importance of opportunities for people with disabilities to achieve the things that are fundamental to each of us who work, volunteer and engage with our communities: accomplishing goals, contributing to a world larger than ourselves, achieving personal fulfillment, sharing time and space with other people, and (for some) earning money. Increased focus on retirement options, volunteer opportunities, community inclusion, and self-employment has the strong potential to open doors for many people with disabilities.



*Cris Donovan, Director of Community Support Services*

To be most successful in shifting the current paradigm to be one of greater inclusion for people with disabilities, OPWDD, people with disabilities and their families, service providers, and all of our communities will need to work together. We will need to be creative. We will need to be daring. And we will need to break down some existing barriers that impede the achievement of meaningful outcomes:

- **Build support for career planning.** Employment can be a limited term that does not consider the full career potential of people with disabilities and does not allow for meeting personal goals associated with volunteerism and other community engagement outside of paid employment. Additional work must be done to broaden the scope of career options, paid and unpaid, available to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- **Break down the perception that employment for people with disabilities is only for those individuals with the highest skills in independence, community orientation and access, and communication.** Without expanding the notion of who is 'employable,' there will continue to be a great number of people left behind. We need to ensure that the full spectrum of opportunities, along with the needed service and business supports, are considered for everyone in our communities.
- **Strongly resist the inclination to build disability-specific programs to meet non-disability specific needs.** Building inclusive and supportive communities requires a commitment on everyone's part to support infrastructure, communities, and families, not to create new ones. With the right support, people with disabilities can participate and share their gifts, without the creation of a separate track.

Franziska Racker Centers is committed to assisting people with disabilities in having meaningful days and encouraging the right amount of support, at the right time, to have the life for which each of us strives.

Additional information on the OPWDD's Transformation Plan, including their plan to increase competitive employment can be found here: [http://www.opwdd.ny.gov/opwdd\\_about/commissioners\\_page/commissioners\\_message/OPWDDs\\_Ongoing\\_Transformation](http://www.opwdd.ny.gov/opwdd_about/commissioners_page/commissioners_message/OPWDDs_Ongoing_Transformation)

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# Fall Celebration 2013

The 2013 Fall Celebration held on November 13th was the culmination of three days of events with special guest, Rachel Simon, bestselling author, public speaker and advocate for people with special needs. Rachel spoke both at the Wilkins Road Learning Center as well as at the Cortland Parent Network Fall Conference to groups made up of staff, community members, individuals and families we serve. On Wednesday, the annual Fall Celebration Awards Ceremony was followed by Rachel's keynote presentation entitled: "Riding through Life with Cool Beth: My Sister's Journey to Independence, My Journey to Embracing my Sister." All three presentations focused on experiences while looking through the lens of growing up with her sister Beth, who has an intellectual disability. Rachel transitions the audience through the different phases of her and her family's lives, while sharing many of the joyful and many of the challenging times her family endured. All of this lays the foundation for Rachel's choice later in life to ride the buses with her sister Beth, in Beth's Central Pennsylvania city, for one life-altering year. Rachel captures the attention of her audience with her memoir, *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, but really wins over the audience when she discusses the experience and how it has impacted her life in such a significant way, leading her down the path to accepting her sister for who her sister really is and wants to be, Cool Beth!

Throughout Rachel's keynote at Wednesday's Fall Celebration, she mentioned numerous times how Racker Centers' Mission and Vision reflect the world that Beth wanted to live in, the integrated and accepting environment that Beth finds each time she steps onto the bus.



*Rachel Simon addresses the crowd during her presentation at the Fall Celebration*



*Rachel signs a book for staff member Barbara Coleman after the Tuesday afternoon presentation at the Wilkins Road Learning Center.*

## *A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR EVENT SPONSORS WHO HELPED MAKE THIS EVENT POSSIBLE:*

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*Pictured above are the Fall Celebration 2013 Award Recipients: Kathy Lind, Pat Montanez, Jean Snow, Barbara Crosier, Guy Stillman*

## **Congratulations to this year's award winners!**

### **THE INSPIRATION AWARD:**

Kathy Lind – Service Coordination Team Leader  
Guy Stillman – Residential/ Preschool RN

### **THE FRANZISKA RACKER AWARD:**

Pat Montanez – Director of Residential Services

### **The Brick Miscall Award:**

Cornell Companions, accepted by Jean Snow

### **The Special Friend Award:**

Barbara Crosier – Vice President, Government Relations at Cerebral Palsy Associations of NYS

CONTINUED FROM COVER...

## Leaps and Bounds: Catching up with former Racker students

**DALLAS** – When Dallas first entered the integrated preschool, he wouldn't speak to adults or children. He played by himself and wouldn't follow classroom routines. He was very shy and cried for the first few days, needing continual reassurance his parents would be back for him and that he could have fun while he waited. Dallas is now 8 years old and in the third grade at BJM Elementary School in Ithaca. Although he says playing chase at recess is his favorite part of school, he also indicates there are lots of fun things. He loves to watch movies and play video games, and his mother adds he has become a whiz at problem-solving when figuring things out on the computer. Dallas' parents state he went from growling to talking and from shy to now having lots of friends to play with on the playground. Bill, his father states, "Racker Centers is one of the best things that ever happened to him."



**JAMES AND EMILY**– James and Emily, siblings, both attended Racker Centers' Special Education Preschool. James is now 10 years old and is in the fifth grade in Dryden. Emily is 8 years old and is in third grade. When James started at Racker preschool, he had a significant speech delay that caused frustration and hindered his ability to communicate wants and needs to adults and peers. James worked hard to learn coping and interactive skills to be able to problem-solve peer disputes. Now, he likes to draw, use the computer and challenge himself with Play Station 2. He participates in the Big Brother Big Sister Program and loves his cats. He recently wrote a speech about why he wanted to be in the "Star Program" at his school. "If you see someone being bullied or they're alone, you help them out. You tell the bully to stop or get a teacher." He shared that he had been bullied before and that it felt bad. He wants to help others.

When Emily started preschool, her speech was also quite delayed and impacted her social skills. It is clear that it is no longer a challenge for Emily to communicate her thoughts. She excitedly tells tales of her "adventurous" games she plays at school with her friends, where they use their imaginations to chase each other through an obstacle course. She says the best thing about school is that she gets to see her friends and make new ones. She is working hard to earn a behavior award and explains "if someone gets hurt or needs something, you try to help them. Or if someone else makes a mess and you didn't, you could help clean it up." She adds "I'm just trying to be my best."

**This year our top fundraising priority is Early Childhood Services.** *The early years are among the most important in a child's development. Providing services for children when they are young is often the "Window of Opportunity" for helping them grow, learn and thrive. These stories highlight how instrumental preschool special education and related therapies are for a child and their entire family's quality of life and future success.*

*The reality is that the that Racker Centers receives covers only about 70% of the actual costs of our programs. It's important for us to continue advocating for the services for all individuals with disabilities in our community, focusing on early treatment and helping people with special needs and their families have good lives.*



**TRUMAN** – Truman began at Racker Centers' daycare program after ongoing challenging behavior caused difficulty in multiple community daycare programs. Typical daycare centers were not equipped to handle Truman's difficult and uncooperative behavior. Although very intelligent and articulate, he struggled to cooperate with routines and adult requests and had difficulty building peer relationships. At 2 ½, he knew all his colors from the basics to magenta. He was bright, creative, and charming with a knack for rationalizing why his ideas should be the agenda. Truman is now in his third and final year as a junior level student at EAC Montessori School in Ithaca. He continues to be bright, creative and charming with an incredible sense of humor and imagination for building structures from articles in a recycling bin, creating masks, and writing plays. He is an avid role player at 8 ¾ years old. (He's almost nine!) Truman has participated in t-ball and Cub Scouts, loves to eat and act, play Minecraft and read. When asked how he thinks he has changed, he states "I've changed a lot since I was younger. I'm more mature. I listen and try to do what people ask." Truman states he has changed how he expresses his anger and is a Big Buddy to a younger student at his school.

*It's no wonder that Racker Centers' staff truly bond with the children and families we work with. We are blessed to learn from them all in whatever forms the lessons may come. For more photos and stories of "Where they are now?" visit [www.rackercenters.org](http://www.rackercenters.org) and [www.facebook.com/franziskarackercenters](http://www.facebook.com/franziskarackercenters)*

**If your child participated in a Racker program and you would like to share what s/he has been doing, please contact Heather Hughes at [info@rackercenters.org](mailto:info@rackercenters.org) or share your story on Racker Centers Facebook page. We would love to hear from you!**

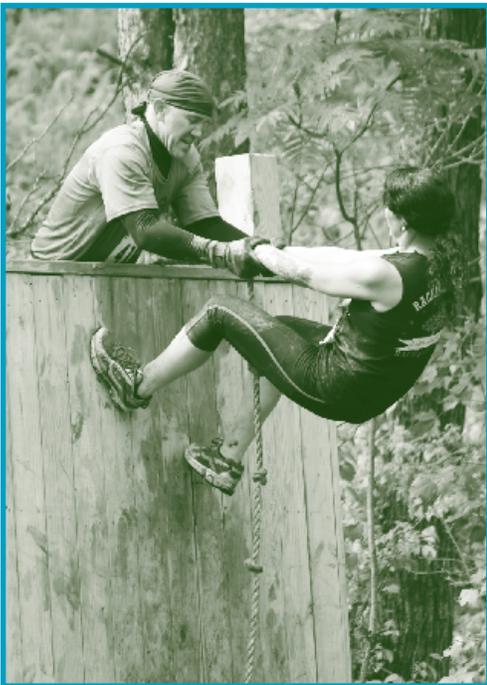
# ARE YOU TUFF ENUFF CHALLENGE *by Tammy Goddard*

On September 15, 2013 the Wellness Committee sponsored Racker Centers' employees as they participated in the first annual Greek Peak Tuff eNuff 5k or 10k race challenge. Almost 30 staff members set out to see if they were "Tuff eNuff" or even "Tuffer." Participants were invited to complete extreme challenges that pushed them to a heightened level of physical and mental endurance through teamwork, adventure and great fun. The morning of the race was chilly and sunny. Staff were all smiles and eager to get the race underway. Some completed the 5k, some the 10k but all completed the goal they had set out to do.



*Team Racker at the Tuff eNuff Challenge. Nearly 30 staff participated in the challenge.*

Some of the obstacles included running through streams, climbing up a plastic sheet on a very steep hill that was covered in liquid soap, crawling through a mud patch (very deep and thick mud by the way), walking across a rope over a very cold pond, swinging from tire swings, climbing over a very high wall, sit ups, walking lunges and squat thrusts, carrying large logs and a Slip 'n Slide. This event was sponsored by Greek Peak, the Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County, Inc. as well as Cortland Prevention Services. Proceeds from the event will assist in generating support and nurture hope for members of our community during their recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. Before we were set free on the race course, we were gathered together inside a storage pod. They closed the door and we stood in the dark and listened to a race volunteer tell us that we were here because we are physically and mentally able do this race. That not everyone can complete this race because they are dealing with addiction and fighting their own fight. Everyone has experienced a fight of their own, are currently fighting a battle, or one day may experience a struggle. We were reminded that through support and hard work you can help make a difference in the lives of others. The race course was full of peer support, people of all ages, abilities and the determination of the human spirit.



*Jim Van Leer assists Sonia Ferro over a wall.*



*Racker staff take off at the starting line.*

## INTRODUCING A SYSTEM OF CARE TO OUR COMMUNITY

Mental health professionals, community officials and community members alike filled the Sibley Conference Room at Racker Centers' Learning Center on October 2nd and 3rd for a well-attended conference held to introduce a System of Care philosophy to our Central New York communities. Joined by professionals from Wraparound Milwaukee, who presented this model, along with examples of successes within their own community, the conference was the brain child of the Collaborative Solution Network (CSN). It was organized as a way to continue to stoke the fires started by this multi-group collaborative which is made up of human service agencies, private and public partners throughout the region as well as community members. Their goal is to address the mental health care needs and wellbeing of children throughout our region.

Introduction of the System of Care philosophy was conducted by Bruce Kamradt, MSW; Mary Jo Myers, MS; and Margaret Jefferson of Wraparound Milwaukee, an established system of care community serving children with serious emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs and their families. Day One included presentations targeting community leaders followed by county planning sessions and was attended by representatives from local government, school superintendents and principals, leadership from Social Services and Human Services departments, United Ways, and Probation offices among others. Day two included a half-day session for community members. With over 140 people in attendance over the two day period and representation from Seneca, Schuyler, Tompkins, Ontario and Chemung counties, attendee evaluations reveal that the majority attending the conference left feeling inspired to see how we can move towards using a more comprehensive system of care approach in our region. When attendees were asked about what things they appreciated about the conference, replies consisted of, "The concrete presentation brought life and energy to the concept of System of Care. Having leadership at the conference was key," and "Seeing Systems of Care done and done well provides hope and vision."



*County break out session being lead by Bruce Kamradt from Wraparound Milwaukee.*



*Mary Jo Meyers MS presents to audience.*

Jaydn McCune, Collaborative Solutions Network (CSN) Director and Franziska Racker Centers' staff member states, "As a result of the conference, County and school administrators are beginning to work on finding ways to share and combine data about children in residential placement to more effectively and collaboratively plan for their transition home when their residential placement is completed." "And Seneca County is now part of the second group of counties participating in the expansion of the System of Care in New York State," states Sally Manning, Early Recognition Specialist with CSN and Racker Centers' employee. She continues, "Schuyler and Tompkins Counties were part of the first group of counties participating in the System of Care expansion grants."

For more information on the Collaborative Solutions Network, our region's System of Care, visit [www.collaborativesolutionsnetwork.org](http://www.collaborativesolutionsnetwork.org)

## ELKS FOUNDATION GIFT SUPPORTS NEW HOME SERVICE VEHICLE



The New York State Elks Association and Cerebral Palsy Associations of NYS established the Home Service Program in 1964. Through this partnership, the New York State Elks have generously funded CP Affiliates, including Franziska Racker Centers. Franziska Racker Centers recently received a \$10,000 donation from the New York State Elks towards a new Home Service vehicle. The 2013 Ford Focus is used in our Tioga County office to help meet the needs of families supported by our Community Support Services department.

*Jennifer Aneshansley, Home Services Director, pictured with the new Ford Focus purchased with funding from the Elks.*



The Legacy Foundation of Tompkins County generously funded a grant of \$5,525 allowing us to purchase a Free Standing Portable Lift to be used by

our residential program. Traditional Hoyer lifts are difficult to disassemble and transport and require two staff to operate. The new lift can be moved easily between houses and can be used when residents travel to events such as the Special Olympics. Additionally, the Portable Lift requires only one staff to operate. In the past, residents who have suffered temporarily immobilizing injuries have had to be moved out of their current living situation into one with an existing Hoyer lift. This will no longer be necessary.



John and Denise Nosewicz, owners of Ithaca Ace Hardware, donated a selection of new "Melissa & Doug" real wood toys to be distributed to our preschool sites in Ithaca, Cortland, and Owego, and also one of our houses for individuals with Autism. Earlier this fall, Ithaca Ace Hardware raffled off a huge stuffed teddy bear. Tari Everts, the customer who won the raffle, donated the bear to Racker Centers. Children in our preschool have enjoyed playing with the bear and taking it for wagon rides. Denise Nosewicz worked previously for the special education program in Spencer Van Etten Central School District.

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## Cayuga Landscape

Ithaca, NY

Cayuga Landscape is generously donating two Honey Locust trees for our Wilkins Road preschool playground. The trees will provide light shade coverage for the swing set area. Cayuga Landscape previously donated trees for our "Making Room"

construction project at our Wilkins Road site. Those trees continue to thrive and have helped make our grounds attractive and welcoming. We appreciate their support and are honored to be able to include them on our list of Business Partners.



## 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** Cris Donovan, Heather Hughes, Tammy Goddard, Linda Kline, Lauren Schler

## FACES OF THE CENTERS



Staff attended the Tioga County Chamber of Commerce Business Showcase. Pictured left to right: Stephanie Quaranta, Social Worker; Barbara Patten, Preschool Education Director; Theresa Melnyk, Residence Counselor; and Rachel Hopkins, Senior Residence Counselor



Participants in the Residential Program attended the SPCA March for the Animals. Pictured left to right: Rebecca, Megan, Emily (Staff), Alyson (Staff), and Jenn.