

OUTLOOK

Supporting People with Disabilities



#bFair2DirectCare

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Direct Care Professionals provide critical services and deserve fair pay!

WANT TO BE AN ADVOCATE? NOW'S YOUR CHANCE.

Did you know that Racker Centers provides mandated services that by law must be made available to people with disabilities in New York State? We do. In actuality, most of what we provide is funded by New York State – making New York State and Racker Centers partners in providing services to people with disabilities in our community. The problem is – our partner doesn't want to grant the necessary funding needed to truly make these critical programs sustainable.

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ADVOCACY *Continued from Cover*

We are facing a staffing crisis. Racker Centers employs nearly 900 people, and we currently have openings for another 126 more. Most of these open positions are for direct care professionals – the staff that is there “on the ground” making the difference for a person with a disability. What happens when we can’t fill these positions? It means that families aren’t receiving the respite that they need to recharge their capacity to help their children learn and succeed. It means that people living in our residential programs have limited opportunities to participate as much as they’d like to in their communities.

Teenagers with disabilities don’t have the staff support to explore their interests, learn life skills, and prepare for the adult world. It means over 125 individuals and/or families are on waiting lists instead of receiving the services they need.



Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton meets with Racker Centers' staff and families in Albany during "Inclusive Democracy in Action".



Above, and below right: Senator Tom O'Mara meets with Racker Centers' staff and families in Albany during "Inclusive Democracy in Action".

Our staff work with children and adults with a wide array of disabilities: autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, spina bifida, and mental health challenges. They work in our preschool programs, our community support programs and in our residential programs – helping people with disabilities to be successful and to have the best life possible. Their jobs are complex – they administer medications, provide personal hygiene and daily care, cook specialized meals, sort through difficult family situations, and ensure proper medical attention when needed. They must be able to change quickly from one to another – teacher, mentor, supporter, caregiver, health provider, community advocate – providing whatever assistance is needed at the time. The work these staff members do is rewarding, challenging, and important. Yet we can only offer starting wages between \$9.00 and \$11.00 an hour. No wonder we are having trouble hiring! But we can’t raise the wages unless New York State increases the funding they give us. It’s that simple, really. And as it gets harder and harder to fill these critical positions, it affects our ability to assure the sustainability of the programs. We can’t run programs without staff. And in order to get staff, we need to pay people appropriately for the complex and challenging work they do.

This is why Racker Centers' advocacy work has become so important. Think about what our communities would be like if Racker Centers couldn't provide the services that they do to over 3,000 people each year. What would happen to those people? Think about the 900 local staff members that are employed by Racker Centers. What would happen if the agency and those jobs were in jeopardy?

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Here are some of the things we are working on:

- We are working with other organizations like ours across New York State – sending a unified message that our workers need to be compensated better or programs will be at risk.
- Staff and families have met with our local representatives and have found them to be compassionate and in agreement with us that the funding for these positions must be increased. They have vowed to take our message to Governor Cuomo.
- We have been on the radio letting people know what we are up against – asking for their help.
- We have been mailing letters and postcards to Albany, asking Governor Cuomo to put the needed stabilization funding in his budget so we can pay people appropriately.



Senator James Seward (L), Executive Director Dan Brown, and Emeritus Director Chuck Tompkins at Racker Centers' Cortland Celebration.

What can you do?

CALL Governor Cuomo (518) 474-1041 and press 3 to speak to an assistant.

TELL Governor Cuomo: *It's time to recognize the skills and knowledge of the staff that support people with disabilities with better wages! That there is a staffing crisis across New York State as agencies struggle to fill positions and staff programs. New York has promised to make these programs available. Tell Governor Cuomo to put the funding in his budget so programs for people with disabilities aren't in jeopardy!*



MAIL a letter to Governor Cuomo at:
*The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
 Governor of New York State
 NYS State Capitol Building
 Albany, NY 12224*

In the end, it's Governor Cuomo who must put the funding in his budget, so that direct care workers can be paid a fair wage for the complex and important work they do and programs can be sustained for the people of New York State. Welcome to advocacy work.

For more information on how you can get involved go to www.rackercenters.org and join our email list.

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COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS RECAP

The three community celebrations are now behind us and were a big success, offering a glimpse of Racker Centers' services and programs through the eyes of some program recipients, their family members and/or staff. The Celebrations also allowed us the opportunity to honor those staff and community partners that help to carry out the important Mission and Vision of Racker Centers. We welcomed over 480 close friends as well as new faces to the celebrations and worked to help create a better understanding and awareness of Racker Centers and the work that we do. Thank you to all who attended! And if you missed it, we hope to see you at one next year!



Awards were received by: (left to right)

CORTLAND COUNTY

- FRANZISKA RACKER AWARD
Cynthia Jones, Teaching Assistant, Cortland Preschool
- THE CORTLAND COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARD
Carole Ann Davies, OCM BOCES Administrator
- THE INSPIRATION AWARD
Julie Caldarulo, Direct Support Professional

TOMPKINS COUNTY

- SPECIAL TRIBUTE - Fran Withiam accepted an award in memory of her husband, Lou Withiam, long-time Elks Ambassador
- THE TOMPKINS COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARD
Ann Marie Peterson (not pictured), Deputy Director New York State OPWDD accepted by Helen Schatz, OPWDD
- SPECIAL FRIENDS AWARDS
Angetta Martinovich, Uniquely You Integrated Massage
Phyllis Tottey, Ithaca City School District Bus Driver
Leroy Barrett, Ithaca City School District Bus Monitor
- INSPIRATION AWARDS
Dorothy Lovelace, Medicaid Service Coordinator
Debbie Bray, Program Director TST BOCES Counseling for School Success



TIOGA COUNTY

(see photos in our Summer 2016 issue)

- THE TIOGA COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARD
Owego Elementary School
- THE INSPIRATION AWARD
Jackie Jackson, Community Support Professional and Family Resource Assistant for Recreation Respite

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

This year the highlight of the celebrations were the panel presentations on 'Belonging' facilitated by Dan Brown, Executive Director of Racker Centers. Panelists had an opportunity to discuss how the supports that they and/or their loved ones have received have impacted their lives.

Some highlights include:

CAROLYN SWANKA

Carolyn Swanka is a Racker Centers staff member who supports individuals at our Circle Drive residential home. Carolyn's two sons, Alex and Chris, also receive supports and services through Racker Centers. During the Cortland Celebration, Carolyn shared how the services that her sons have received, including their stays at our respite house, Starry Night, have supported her sons and helped her and her family. Respite allowed Carolyn and her daughter to experience going on a vacation together and provided Carolyn the support she needed when battling cancer herself while still needing support for her boys.



RAY DAVIS

Ray participated in the panel at the Tioga Celebration. He enjoys spending his time participating in sports, fishing and riding his bicycle. He recently accomplished his long-time goal of obtaining employment. Ray works at Price Chopper as a cart attendant. He is very dedicated to this job and has recently taken on the additional responsibility of janitorial duties and working at the bottle return area. Ray receives Supported Employment services through Community Options and ongoing training and support through OPWDD's Employment Training Program. He also receives Community Habilitation services through Franziska Racker Centers wherein his Community Support Professional supports him in his desire to volunteer and teaching him how to manage and budget his money.

NICOLE MAGEE

Nicole Magee grew up in Tompkins County and graduated from the TST BOCES Smith School. She moved into a residential group home as a young adult and later moved into one of Racker Centers residential homes. All along Nicole has been very vocal about wanting to live on her own. She receives Community Support Services from Racker Centers, and through these services, she has been able to work on her goal of living independently. Nicole has transitioned from a residential group home to a supported living apartment, and just this past July was finally able to celebrate moving into her own apartment. Through her natural supports, such as friends she's made at her new apartment complex and her fiancé, and through her supports at Racker Centers, Nicole is enjoying her ability to spread her wings in her own space. She was joined on the Tompkins County panel by Dorothy Lovelace, Medicaid Service Coordinator.



Racker Centers would also like to thank Mutual of America for their event sponsorship of \$2000 for our Tompkins Celebration. Their support helped to underwrite the cost of individuals and families so more could attend the event.

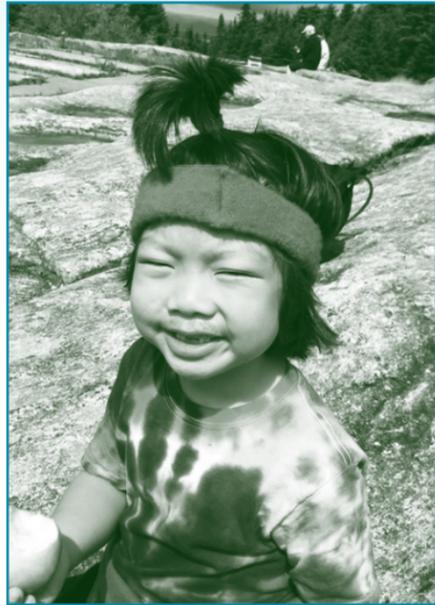


The Frame Shop has supported Racker Centers in honoring the Franziska Racker Award recipient each year by donating their services to beautifully mount and frame the Racker Award. This year's award was presented to Cynthia Jones, Teaching Assistant, Cortland Preschool.

Racker Centers thanks the Maguire Family of Dealerships and Well Said Media for sponsoring in part all three Community Celebrations this year.

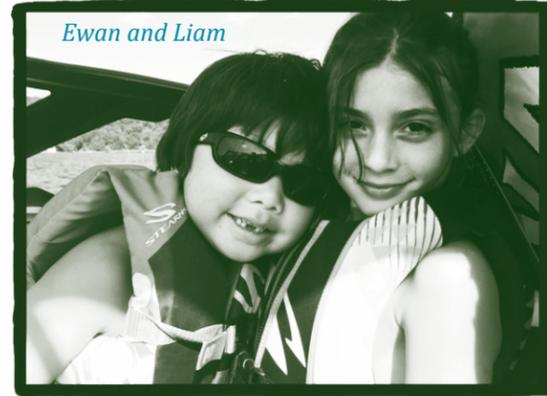


MEET EWAN by *Bethany Brown*



This summer my husband Brad and I witnessed an extraordinary event. After two hours of continuous hiking we came to the summit of Blue Mountain with our two sons. While others likely saw a young family, sweaty, a little cranky, and ready for a snack and a rest, Brad and I were elated at our youngest son, Ewan's, accomplishment of hiking the mountain with very little support. He had spent the entire two hours bouncing, jumping, climbing and walking up a difficult trail, all while doing a running commentary on everything from nature to his awesome ninja skills.

Ewan is six. He came home to us at 11 months old, adopted from South Korea. A beautiful, squishy boy with giant cheeks, he was the perfect completion to our little family. His big brother Liam, who at the young age of four had already spent more than half his life waiting for a little brother, was eager to teach Ewan everything he knew. Ewan spoke a few words in Korean and started walking a week before his first birthday. We were overjoyed. Within two months of his



Ewan and Liam

homecoming, things began to take a turn. Ewan became almost exclusively silent, only making noise when he was shrieking at the sight of any water. His mouth remained open all the time, drooling through many outfits a day. While he walked, he fell many, many times a day and had frequent facial injuries. Most frighteningly, he had two significant choking incidents within two weeks — the first of which nearly took his life — and he was just trying to chew mashed cauliflower. To this day, watching him eat tricky foods like grapes can cause me to shake. On top of all of this, Ewan was frequently very ill. We had no idea what was causing this quick decline and doctors shook their heads, baffled.

While it would be a two year journey that involved 18 specialists in 4 states before we knew what Ewan's medical condition was, we were lucky to be able to have Ewan evaluated through Racker Centers' Early Intervention program immediately. Over the course of the next three years, Ewan received speech, occupational and physical therapy. The foundation of Early Intervention Service's is the partnership between family and therapist, and we certainly had that partnership with each of his therapists. It would be easy to say that because I work at Racker Centers, I had already developed some of those relationships, but that would be too easy an answer, not accurate, and one that takes away from the extraordinary work the therapists do.

There were moments early on when we cried, fearing that Ewan would never be able to form a kiss, tell us that he loved us, or play the many sports we were already involved in. Each therapist would devote their time with Ewan working on his strength, keeping him engaged in a session and teaching us what to continue at home. I can remember all the little milestones that we would cheer like Ewan was a gold medalist in the Olympics. I remember watching Liam patiently sit face to face with Ewan, forming the letter F with his mouth while reading the "F" book Ewan's therapist Peg had made him to help him. I remember doing oh so many stairs with Ewan and Jake, his physical therapist.

Early intervention and therapies for young children are not a luxury, but a must-have for many. For us and for Ewan, it was lifesaving, both physically and emotionally.



His therapists taught Ewan how to walk safely, how to eat safely, how to speak, and later, how to hold a pencil and learn to write his name. But they also taught us to constantly remind ourselves, and to remind Ewan, of all the already wonderful things he could do, of how beautiful he was, and of how much he would still do in his lifetime, regardless of ability. I admit that it was sometimes hard to keep that perspective and I often would question in my head if they were being a bit too optimistic.

They were right. Ewan graduated from all services a little over a year ago. In the past year we watched him navigate kindergarten, join a soccer team, make friends, learn to ride a two wheel bicycle, and most recently, tie his shoes. He talks constantly, even in his sleep. He has enriched our lives in ways that are too numerous to name and most importantly, his journey and working with the therapists has taught us to focus on all the strengths we each have and the beauty of each milestone.

RACKER RECIEVES FUNDS FROM NEW YORK STATE ELKS

Racker Centers was a recipient of a special award grant from the New York State Elks Major Projects Inc. this year. The NYS Elks Major Projects Inc. awarded seven grants in 2016. Racker Centers received funding to assist with the purchase of an Omni-Spin piece of playground equipment, an age appropriate piece that can be enjoyed by all of the children who attend Racker Centers' preschool site in Tompkins County. Thank you NYS Elks for your support to help make our playground safe and fun for all of the children!



GENEROUS BEQUEST

In the fall of 2002, a woman stopped in unexpectedly at Racker Centers' site on Wilkins Road. The woman met with Perri LoPinto on that day and asked for information on how she could make a planned gift to the agency in honor of her husband. The woman said she knew about Racker Centers and the good work the agency does from her neighbor, whose child received services. Fast forward 14 years later - and after the passing of this lovely lady, her generous bequest has been realized. A check in the amount of \$305,557.24 was received on July 29th, 2016. The amount far exceeded our expectations for this planned gift. To fulfill this caring woman's wishes of supporting early childhood services in Ithaca, a large portion of her bequest was designated to support the Making Room Campaign which helped to renovate the Margaret Gibson Preschool on Wilkins Road, where our Tompkins County preschool program serves over 100 children annually. The remainder of her gift will be used to support the agency's area of greatest need which is the funding gap for Early Childhood services. Her generous gift will remain anonymous per her wishes. We could not be more grateful for this generous support.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED FOR PRESCHOOLERS THROUGH GRANT

The Tioga preschool team, and all of us at Franziska Racker Centers, would like to thank the Floyd Hooker Foundation for the grant they awarded to Franziska Racker Centers this spring for our Tioga County Preschool Enrichment program. As a result of the grant twenty-two children benefitted from enhanced programming during the six week summer session. Many of the activities were new experiences for most of the children, and not something they would typically have the chance to take part in. These programs create opportunities for children to socialize and learn amongst their peers.



Annie from Owego Gymnastics made the following comment regarding the preschool's visit, "Other children at the gym asked about the Racker Centers' kids. Having them here definitely brought awareness to the other children that kids with disabilities can participate and belong in the community." She concludes, "Having them here brings awareness to everyone."

The programs and activities made possible by this grant allowed these children to participate in new educational opportunities that they will not soon forget — and that will not soon be forgotten by other community members either.

For a list of Business Partners visit www.rackercenters.org. For more information on naming Racker Centers in your will and Planned Giving contact Perri LoPinto at 607-272-5891 ext.234 or perri@rackercenters.org.

MISSION STATEMENT | We support people with disabilities and their families to lead fulfilling lives by providing opportunities to learn and be connected with others.

VISION STATEMENT | We envision a world where all people know they belong.

EMPLOYEES HONORED AT CP OF NYS CONFERENCE

Two employees were recently honored at this year’s annual Cerebral Palsy of New York State conference at a dinner held on Tuesday, October 18th. Honored at the President’s Dinner were staff member Sandra Washington, Direct Support Professional, and Sarah Matt, Medicaid Service Coordinator.

Pictured below with Executive Director Dan Brown, both Sandra and Sarah were honored among staff being recognized at CP affiliates from across the state. ***Congratulations Sarah and Sandra!***



Sandra has been a dedicated Direct Service Professional for 16 years. She works every day to help improve the lives of those she supports. Sandra consistently demonstrates a desire to go above and beyond what is expected. Families trust their loved ones in her care because she is caring, consistent and thorough.



Sarah has been with the agency since 2014. She inspires Racker Centers’ Medicaid Service Coordinator team and the families she serves. Sarah approaches difficult situations with optimism and refreshing ideas and is respectful to individuals and families while providing person centered planning.