

OUTLOOK

Racker

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SATURDAY
JULY
15

LYNAH RINK
CORNELL



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FROM THE DESK OF



CRIS DONOVAN

Executive Director
Racker

Summer is officially here, and that means it's time for Racker Rivals Big Red! Racker Rivals Big Red is our annual event that raises money for Racker's clinical services for the youngest children in the Early Childhood Programs, which are also the most woefully underfunded of the services Racker provides. This year's final New York state budget did not increase the rates for Early Intervention therapies for babies and toddlers with developmental delays, despite high inflation rates experienced by providers and the inclusion of an 11% increase in the Senate and Assembly budgets. Somehow, financial support for babies in need did not make the final cut. The continued lack of investment in children is beyond disheartening. Thankfully, we live in a generous community and the money that is raised by a hockey game goes a long way toward filling the gap so that we can continue to do this important work.

Generosity is one of the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage. At Racker, we consider this to be a foundational value in all our work. We look for opportunities to share our expertise, give our time, and support others in the achievement of their goals. Our purpose, and our responsibility, is in our contribution to the lives of others and the inspiration of a culture of caring for one another.

These days the idea of a culture of caring for each other can sometimes feel a long way off. We are living in a time when there can be a larger focus on ourselves than on our role in promoting the greater good. One thing that has always struck me when thinking about generosity is the role it plays in building community and bringing people together. It turns out that caring for others is what leads us to belonging. One of the very best parts of the Racker Rivals Big Red event is the community it fosters. Between the family skate, the massive number of volunteers needed to pull it off, corporate sponsors, the engagement of so many Racker staff, and, of course, the hockey players, coaches, and trainers whose generosity makes it possible for this event to happen, you can see and feel the caring and belonging. It is truly a wonderful day.

In this issue of the Outlook, we are highlighting some of the work that happens in our Early Childhood Programs in preparation for the big event on July 15! You'll read stories about Emma and Vivian, two children in our Early Childhood Programs, and the growth and successes they've experienced with the help and guidance of our talented staff and therapists. You'll also read an example of some of the "behind the scenes" work that happens with the Trumansburg School District to ensure continuity of services, the important role of families, and how our Early Childhood Programs set the stage for the future success of children as they progress through their school careers.

The research continues to demonstrate the effectiveness and importance of high-quality early childhood services on the trajectory of the youngest children with developmental delays. I hope you can join us on July 15th for Racker Rivals Big Red and experience the joy, care, and dedication!



VIVIAN - THERAPY IN PRESCHOOL

Starting school for the first time can be a frightening and overwhelming experience for anyone - regardless of age or ability. Vivian Lansing, a preschooler at Racker's Margaret Gibson Preschool, faced many challenges as a new student in the Ducks Classroom two years ago. In a world that appeared new and unpredictable, Racker Speech Therapist Sarah Michelle says that Vivian faced speech difficulties and rough transitions during her first few months. As Sarah notes, "She's a girl who likes her routines...and other children, understandably, are unpredictable."

"She was just crying. She had a really hard transition on her first day. We never know how long that's going to be - but she eased into the routine, and she's been on a nice sprint of development!" Sarah says that a sparkly personality emerged from Vivian, and that it's been incredibly exciting working with her. She's progressed in her development and is showing an incredible sense of humor, not to mention - great creativity with her pretend play and making friends with her peers. "A huge, huge change from that first day."

Vivian, now in her second year, has made incredible strides that her family and Racker therapists are incredibly proud of. Her mother Makenzi states, "I cannot imagine where Vivian's development would be these last two years if it weren't for Racker." The entire environment of teachers, aides, and therapists have been an inspiration for Makenzi, "Their selflessness and dedication to the children at Racker are something I have admired and even learned from."

Special Education Teacher Jackie Moore, Occupational Therapist Cheryl Herold, Speech Therapist Sarah Michelle, as well as classroom aides Tanya Smith and Jocelyn Jackson "have been beyond loving, helpful, attentive, patient and supportive," says Makenzi. These are important traits when supporting children in childcare and preschool settings. Often, children who enter these settings have little to no social experiences outside of family events. Routines and expectations are essential practices in an organized classroom; and can be difficult for children when they are first introduced to a nonfamily-based setting. Skills like making new friends and setting your own personal boundaries with those friends, although they go hand-in-hand, do not always develop at the same time.

Vivian is practicing self-talk and is recognizing what's tough for her - profoundly positive skills to learn at such a young



age. Sarah Michelle notes that she is trying new foods and snacks while at school in the Duck room - an amazing milestone for Vivian as she has had a very specific diet thus far while at home and at school. When trying a new snack, Vivian perked up and said, "Good job, Vivi!" and gave herself a thumbs up! "To see herself give herself a pat on the back is so fun," Sarah enthuses.

Cheryl Herold, Occupational Therapist, recalls that "Vivian was fearful of going into the classroom and she would struggle with her parent or grandmother leaving." In the beginning of her first year, Vivian would utilize a transitional object or a favorite stuffed animal to become interested in an activity or even just enter the classroom each day. Now, Cheryl exclaims that she appears much more self-confident. She is happy to go about her daily routine, and she is always eager to go to therapy now - asking Cheryl if it is her turn to go play! Cheryl reflects, "Her regulation and her ability to cope with stress and anxiety that she may feel has gotten much better. She is learning to advocate for needs and will ask for help when she needs it." Not only are self-regulation and self-advocacy important skills for a soon-to-be kindergartener, but they're also integral skills that will support Vivian's success in the years to come.

Kindergarten is on the agenda for the next year. Vivian is already talking about going off to school next year with her big brother! She will be attending Trumansburg Elementary - the perfect opportunity for her transition, as Racker's rich partnership with Trumansburg School District means potentially familiar faces and supports available in-house. Vivian practices 'being the teacher' in her Racker classroom - holding circle time and giving pretend instructions to her friends in class. Vivian's time in the "Ducky Room" has come full circle. Her attitude and approach in her day to day are not only a positive influence for her peers, but an inspiration to her educators and therapists. Makenzi, Vivian's mother, exclaims, "I notice her excitement and joy to go to school every day!"



PARTNERSHIP WITH TRUMANSBURG SCHOOL DISTRICT



Racker is committed to supporting the complex needs of children and their families transitioning from our Early Childhood program into kindergarten. Transitions can be hard for anybody - but especially so for the children and parents navigating new challenges in the classroom and changes to the school-day routine. Angela Gemignani, Director of Special Education at Trumansburg School District, recognizes the challenges that come with moving to a new school and has partnered with Racker to ensure that the process is as smooth as possible for everyone involved.

Every year, funds raised at our annual Racker Rivals Big Red hockey game go directly to our Early Childhood education programs, as well as strengthening partnerships with school districts like Trumansburg.

Trumansburg, like many school districts in the area, does not have its own inclusive pre-school — which is what makes Racker's partnership with Trumansburg so special. "Physically, your program is close to us on Wilkins Road," Angie says, "but I think, even more so, the students that aren't as successful in our UPK [Universal Pre-K] thrive in your programs. They're never a one size fits all." Trumansburg is small in comparison to other surrounding districts in the Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga (TST) region, but the fourth largest overall - behind Ithaca, Dryden, and Lansing.

As part of a new model implemented this year, Racker Physical Therapist Melanie McKaney, DPT, spends dedicated time at Trumansburg School District. This allows for more services to be provided when and where they're needed the most. "They go and support in any ways that the district might need, which might be completing the sessions, but it might also be RTI [Response to Intervention] classes or supporting the preschool—support in different ways that doesn't fit into an IEP [Individual Education Plan] box," observes Sue Raymond, Racker's Director of Clinical Services, "Hopefully, providing a bigger picture of support to [the students'] education than just doing a session." Sue says of Melanie, "She has the space and resources she needs to

function as a PT in the building. Which, to have a building that is welcoming to a provider is huge! It makes Racker feel like we're important to that district as well."

One of Racker's goals for students leaving the program is to properly prepare them, and their families, for the transition into public school. The majority of Trumansburg's pre-school evaluations are completed by Racker, based on parent choice, and an evaluation can be done for any child transitioning out of Early Childhood who has a concern. Angie says, "Parents who have been at the evaluation are coming in with a strong understanding and feeling like they were really a part of the process."

Angie shared that parent involvement is essential to students' successful integration:

When [parents] come to us for kindergarten, often they cry because they're leaving Racker [and] the support that they feel from that team at Racker of really understanding their kid and communicating with them. We have parents who understand their [children's] needs and feel some confidence in a system to meet those needs.

There's a built-in understanding that their children will be treated with dignity, respect, and patience throughout the entire course of transition, which bolsters success.

Sue Raymond praises Trumansburg for being a steady constant in the process. "If I have a child who's coming through the system, I feel absolute faith that Angie is going to hear what this child needs as a big picture and work towards the best solution given her resources. She wants to be part of the solution to meet the deadlines, to help us [do the work successfully]."

Strong integral partnerships like the one we share with Angie and the Trumansburg School District are able to flourish because of the incredible support from our donors and events like Racker Rivals Big Red.



EMMA - THRIVING AT CORTLAND



Emma was born to Steve Trobert and Dr. Kelly Noble at 24 weeks' gestation, sixteen weeks short of full term. Born with non-symmetrical cerebral palsy and weighing in at 1.1 lbs., Emma spent the first six months of her life in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in Buffalo, NY. While she grew stronger and gained weight, Emma underwent heart surgery in just the first few weeks of her life. Emma also received oxygen during her stay in the NICU to ensure the best chance for sustained growth while her lungs and body continued to develop. After nearly half a year, Emma and her family celebrated her profound successes and left the hospital to start their new life at home in Cortland, NY. For almost a year while at home, Emma remained on oxygen, finally retiring from supplemental O₂ just as the COVID-19 pandemic first surged in March of 2020.

With developmental delays related to her premature birth, Emma started receiving Physical, Occupational, and Speech Therapies through Early Intervention (EI) providers in Cortland County as soon as she came home from the hospital. The COVID-19 Pandemic hit shortly thereafter, and services shifted to teletherapy. Emma's parents note that she did very well with the teletherapy during the pandemic, which lasted for about 2 years until the beginning of 2022. During that time, Emma was able to receive some in-home services and classes while continuing to monitor and mitigate any respiratory concerns related to the pandemic and prematurity. When the time came to transition from EI to preschool aged services, Emma started at the Racker Cortland Preschool.

Steve and Kelly spent a considerable amount of time researching preschool providers in the area, while also putting a great deal of thought into the transition from keeping Emma at home to going to an in-person preschool environment. Ultimately, the family decided on Racker's Cortland Preschool as the best option for Emma to learn, socialize, and continue benefiting from on-site therapy services. Emma's mom, Kelly, says, "It's been good for Emma because it's a classroom setting, but they still have a lot of help – a good ratio of kids to adults. She's in a classroom that's all-inclusive, and has people with all different sorts of backgrounds, and that's really great for her to socialize. She's still able to get into a routine of school and get used to a normal routine – she does better with her routine at school than she does at home."



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Racker

SCAN TO APPLY!





Racker Rivals Big Red is back on Saturday, July 15th at Lynah Rink! Since its inception in 2014, this hockey game has successfully raised over a million dollars to support early childhood services at Racker. With Cornell Men's Hockey Coach Mike Schafer and Greg Hartz leading the way as team captains, this event has united the community and ignited a passion for making a difference.

The driving force behind Racker Rivals Big Red Hockey is the dedication to providing essential resources for early childhood services. Unfortunately, these services are often underfunded, leaving many children and families without the support they need during their formative years.

One of the key elements of Racker Rivals Big Red Hockey is its unique fundraising approach. Players take on the responsibility of raising funds through a peer-to-peer platform, reaching out to their networks and engaging with friends, family, colleagues, and community members. This grassroots effort ensures that the fundraising efforts are far-reaching and inclusive, while also fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among the players.

The success of Racker Rivals Big Red Hockey is a testament to the incredible generosity and support of the community. Each year, individuals and businesses alike rally behind the event, recognizing the significance of investing in early childhood services. The funds raised have made a tangible difference, providing resources for education, healthcare, and developmental programs that directly benefit young children and their families.



The impact of Racker Rivals extends far beyond the dollars raised. It serves as a powerful reminder that when a community comes together with a shared purpose, extraordinary things can be achieved. The event has not only raised awareness about the importance of early childhood services but has also created a strong sense of camaraderie and unity among participants.



We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Coach Mike Schafer, Greg Hartz, and all the participants and supporters of Racker Rivals Big Red Hockey for their unwavering dedication to improving the lives of young children in our community. Together, we can make a lasting difference.



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

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