

Beacons for School Success



How are the Children?

From the Desk of Cris Donovan - pg.2

The Big Difference at Turning Point

Ewan's Story - pg. 3

How Lighthouse & Possibilities are Guiding Growth - pg. 4

FROM THE DESK OF



CRIS DONOVAN

Executive Director
Racker

HOW ARE THE CHILDREN?

Many of you likely know that “Kasserian Ingera” is the traditional greeting of the Maasai tribe in Africa. The greeting, translated as: “And how are the children?” is typically met with “the children are well” -- a sign that the community, as a whole, is well.

When considering this issue of the Outlook, I thought about how OUR children are doing. We knew that children’s mental health was in peril before the pandemic. Since 2020, with the interruptions in connection, health care, and education, many children and families are suffering even more.

In their 2023 “The State of Mental Health in America” report, Mental Health America noted that over 1 in 10 youth in the United States are experiencing life-changing depression, and that most youth with major depression (59.8%) do not receive any care. Despite these numbers, nationwide, only .72% of students are identified with emotional disturbance for an individualized education program to support their success in school.*

At Racker, our work supporting youth with social emotional disabilities started in 1988. Today, Racker’s Counseling for School Success program includes a variety of different service models to support youth and their families across a continuum of needs, with most done in partnership with schools, local BOCES, counties, and other community service providers. We are working to help kids individually and systemically, tackling challenges and finding opportunities to make systems and services work for families and their children.

Our mental health services encompass a variety of evidence-based strategies as well as new and innovative approaches. In this issue of the Outlook, you’ll have a chance to read about some of the different service models as well as some of our new initiatives to help youth spearheaded by a talented team of Racker counselors, teachers, and social workers.

We are truly grateful to live and work in communities that prioritize mental health care and value the need to be there for our youth. We see wonderful things happening every day and we know more needs to be done. One thing is certain, none of these breakthroughs and successes would be possible without the staff who pour their energy, creativity, and optimism into the work despite the overwhelming need. Through small steps to growth, every student who enters Racker’s Counseling for School Success programs can feel confident that they are not alone, that the staff are committed to their progress, and that they belong.

So, how are the children?

*MHA report: The State of Mental Health in America (2023)



tinyurl.com/55acmsws



DAY TREATMENT: THE BIG DIFFERENCE

In the Turning Point programs at OCM and TST BOCES, Racker social workers work with elementary, middle school and high school students to offer a wide range of mental health and behavioral support. The goal of this program is for students to learn skills to eventually return to their home school.

For a student named Ewan, this program has provided some help with self-empowerment and learning new strategies for school.

Ewan, who faced anxiety stemming from school-based trauma, found solace and guidance through his partnership with Racker social worker, Corey. They worked to establish trust, recognizing that it was the cornerstone for addressing Ewan's challenges and helping him navigate the school environment with confidence. Their collaborative efforts not only transformed Ewan's experience but also highlighted the profound impact that self-advocacy and understanding can have on a student's path to success.

Corey remembers his first encounter with Ewan as a chance to help: "Ewan is an intelligent, polite, and thoughtful young man who first joined the OCM BOCES Turning Point program in 2017. At that time, he struggled with learning, sensory, and social emotional needs that were not able to be successfully met in his mainstream school setting. The first step was for Ewan to feel a sense of belonging and to understand that he could trust the professionals working with him."

Ewan's goal was to return to his home school district, a feat that seemed daunting due to his past traumas. However, with Corey's support, Ewan began to connect with his emotions and develop self-awareness skills. This crucial step enabled him to self-advocate, a skill that would prove invaluable as he worked towards his goal. One of the distinguishing factors in their journey was the flexibility of the staff and the absence of assumptions about the students. Instead of adhering to a one-size-fits-all approach, the team at Racker recognized Ewan as an individual with unique needs. This foundation of respect and partnership allowed Ewan to flourish and thrive in an environment that catered to his specific requirements.

Ewan's mother, Leigh, found the approach of Racker's staff to be a breath of fresh air: "The big difference was the flexibility of the staff and the lack of assumptions about the student's challenges. They came into the relationship with an open mind. They took his needs seriously, not conforming to a certain way of supporting him. They were very adaptive and flexible."



Top: Ewan and peers on nature walk. Below: Ewan & Corey playing chess.



Corey, demonstrating a profound commitment to Ewan's well-being, took Ewan's needs seriously. He looked beyond the surface, viewing Ewan as a whole person with aspirations, struggles, and untapped potential. He knows that working with Ewan's family is a key component in Ewan's progress. Corey says, "Ewan's mother, Leigh, has always been Ewan's strongest advocate. She fights to ensure that Ewan, and students like him, are being seen for who they are. With her support, along with his BOCES and Day Treatment team, Ewan has been able to learn skills to manage stress and big emotions. His team is proud of his progress and his plans to continue his education at his home school."

This year, Ewan is splitting his days at BOCES and his home school. With his progress, and some new strategies for learning, Ewan hopes to move to a full day at his home district. The Big Difference? According to Leigh, "Viewing the whole person and supporting him the way he needed to be supported."





LIGHTHOUSE & POSSIBILITIES: SMALL STEPS TO GROWTH

Racker is no stranger to small successes, and the programs offered in partnership with TST BOCES are no different. It is these incremental changes that mark a much larger transformation in learning, behavior, and problem-solving for students of all ages. Among the initiatives under the umbrella of Counseling for School Success are Lighthouse and Possibilities, programs designed to support students to remain in their home schools and prevent the need for a higher level placement such as Day Treatment.

The Lighthouse program, created in 1999, is a 6-week program on the BOCES campus designed for students in 7th to 12th grade who are struggling with difficult transitions or mental health challenges. The program follows an 8-1-1 classroom model, employing a BOCES teacher and TA along with a full-time Racker social worker/coordinator.





Lighthouse and Possibilities Program Director Cathryn Sellers says, “A lot of times students are coming from a residential placement or from the hospital after a mental health crisis ... There’s a lot of high anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and trauma of some sort that’s happened to those students, and they’re trying to return to their home schools.” Most recently, she notes, they see many students who struggle to attend school at all. Lighthouse staff provide individualized academic and social emotional support, teaching new skills to get schoolwork back on track and stabilize mental health challenges through counseling and linkages to community supports.

Out in the larger community, Racker’s Possibilities staff (including four social workers and a seasoned teacher) provides outreach to students and families, supporting kids’ success within their home schools. Working from a plan developed with the family, they work intensively on goals ranging from helping to meet basic needs to

collaborating with staff to address learning barriers.

Like all Racker programs, Possibilities takes a strengths-based approach, identifying what is already working and building on it. Much of the work involves partnering with local programs to get families the support they need.

In recent years, Possibilities staff has been helping schools to address the lingering challenges attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic - among them school avoidance, as students continue to struggle with the return to in-person schooling and navigating social situations. The Possibilities team is researching and adopting different methodologies to alleviate this challenge and support students, their home schools, and their families – even if it means showing up at a student’s house in the morning to help them overcome barriers to attending school.

Cathryn says that the most rewarding part of her work is seeing the immense growth that can happen over time for students – and sometimes the biggest victories are the small, day-to-day wins.

At the conclusion of each student’s term in Lighthouse, the team schedules a special ceremony with all the students: “Every student in the room shares two appreciations about the people that are leaving and one wish for them going forward. That ceremony is one of the little shining moments where you hear the impact that one student has on another.” 🌲



SCARLETT & JASPER



When new students visit the Turning Point program at TST BOCES, we make a point of introducing them to an important member of our therapy team: Scarlett The Poodle. Scarlett, like her brother Jasper who served the program from 2009-2020, is an approved therapy dog through Therapy Dogs International. Scarlett's most important role at Turning Point is to help children who may be struggling with big feelings. Her steady and loving

presence has been invaluable in calming certain students who are not able to accept support from adults during hard times.

Scarlett's owner, Racker Senior Clinician Rebecca Mosher says, "I knew when I got Jasper as a puppy in 2006 that I wanted to pursue having him certified to do Animal Assisted Therapy and was thrilled to have the support of program administrators to do so. The number of lives that have been impacted by contact with Jasper and Scarlett over the course of the last 15 years is astounding! From the kids who've learned to not be afraid of dogs as a result of their contact, to the kids who were able to settle and regulate due to their presence. There are many days when I joke that I am the 'transporter of the poodles' as they are the first to be greeted when we walk down the hall – rightfully so. The value that they've brought to the program is truly immeasurable." 🌳



RACKER RECEIVES RESILIENT COMMUNITIES GRANT

Racker was a recent recipient of The Resilient Communities Grant! This biannual grant is distributed by the Community Foundation of Tompkins County and is geared to support nonprofits, school districts, municipalities and faith communities.

This year, Racker was awarded \$3,000 from the Community Foundation to go towards training in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR). The funding will cover a portion of the costs associated with training counselors in Racker's Counseling for School Success programs at BOCES with appropriate skills for treating the effects and symptoms of trauma – most notably Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The complete training for Racker counselors will cost over \$15,000 and take close to four months to complete. Racker is seeking other funding sources to help cover the funding gap for this valuable training.

EMDR is widely respected among mental health professionals and is endorsed by the World Health Organization as a first-choice treatment for PTSD. Recent studies reveal higher remission rates in PTSD symptoms with EMDR therapy, distinguishing it from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Unlike the traditional approach, EMDR

doesn't require trauma intellectualization, requires no homework, demonstrates faster and more efficient treatment, and has shown lasting effects.

Racker counselors have provided countless services over the years to students enrolled in either the Turning Point or Lighthouse program. Many students suffer from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) — traumas consisting of domestic violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, neglect, and other varieties— which underly their most problematic behaviors and psychological challenges. This trauma remains a major barrier to human flourishing; left untreated, it will hinder them throughout their lives. Children with significant ACEs, however, are unlikely to receive therapy. Nearly all children served by Racker counselors in the School Success programs have significant ACEs and trauma, and the Resilient Communities grant will assure access to EMDR therapy for every child.

Racker is thankful to the Community Foundation of Tompkins County for the Resilient Communities Grant of \$3,000 to support counselors with specialized EMDR training. This training will put counselors and students on the best track possible for success! 🌳

THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE

Informed by traditional indigenous cultures' child-rearing practices and based on a medicine wheel, The Circle of Courage and its four-quadrant structure have a long history of respectful adaptation by Racker. The Circle of Courage model and philosophy were developed initially by Martin Brokenleg, Larry Brendtro, and Steve Van Bockern.

During the summer of 2022, a group of Racker's Turning Point / Counseling for School Success counselors from TST BOCES traveled to South Dakota to learn more about the Circle of Courage through the Reclaiming Youth Movement. Since then, two of these counselors (Emily James, LCSW, and Mara Haws, LMSW) have offered several Circle of Courage presentations to Racker leadership and administrators, as well as provided workshops to TST BOCES educational and therapeutic teams.

Additionally, during the summer and early fall of 2022, Emily and Mara partnered with Diane R. Wiener, LMSW, to design "The Quest Curriculum," an empowering, collaborative, therapeutic role-playing game for group counseling with young children. "The Quest" launched at TST BOCES during the 2022-2023 school year; the curriculum is currently being offered for the second time.

The Quest engages the four major principles of the Circle of Courage—Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity—with the additional elements of "Safety" and "Adventure" as updated in Circle of Courage revisions. *The Hero's Journey* is also a cornerstone of The Quest Curriculum. As with the Circle of Courage, *The Hero's Journey* approach is adapted for K-6 elementary students with emotional disabilities.

The Quest employs a realistic, strengths-based approach with a fantastical "spin." The use of heroic imagery and creative, interdisciplinary storytelling seek to provide each child with the opportunity to go on a journey, finding their own paths toward responsible self-care, insight, emotional self-regulation, engagement, humility, independence and interdependence, along with other themes, objectives, and character "tasks."

Students who are "questing" are encouraged to:

- Engage in cognitive behavioral processing
- Learn about and practice frustration tolerance
- Focus on flexibility
- Seek healthy developmental sequencing
- Practice mindfulness

We look forward to the various ways in which The Circle of Courage continues to make meaningful connections happen at Racker. 🌳



(below) Student draws herself in the Circle of Courage as part of an exercise



EDITOR'S NOTE

Racker's Counseling for School Success Program is expansive to meet the needs of students in our community.

This edition of the Outlook is devoted to sharing some small insight into the program, an encouraging story of growth and the energy our staff brings to the work.

During our conversations for this edition, we found that we didn't have nearly enough space in the newsletter to provide a full perspective on the program.

With that thinking, we've included a more robust description of this essential program on our website.

We encourage you to scan this QR code to learn more about Counseling For School Success, and the programs that impact our community.



tinyurl.com/538hrvww

Racker
3226 Wilkins Road
Ithaca, NY 14850

OUTLOOK

WWW.RACKER.ORG

Executive Director
Cristine Donovan

Medical Director
Jeffrey S. Lewis, M.D., D.M.D.

Board President, Jo Ellen Rose
Vice-President, Kim Overby, MD, MBE
Treasurer, Frank Fetsko
Secretary, Nancy Corwin Malina

Directors
Aloja Airewele
Kellea Bauda
Allan Bishop
Susan Cole
Kyle Darlow
Max Della Pia
Becky Gould
Gigi Horvath
Josh Marland
Emily Papperman
Heather Wineburg

Emeriti Executive Directors
Dan Brown
Roger R. Sibley

Emeriti Directors
John Crosby
Phyllis Joyce
Stephen Lipinski
Tom Longin
Daniel McNeil
David Palmer
Sarah Rich, Ph.D.
Chuck Tompkins
Mark Weidman
Fred (Ben) Williams

Associate Directors
Carolyn Bartell
Tom Bohn
David Campbell
Daphne Cornell
David McNeil
Cal Organ
Kara Pass
Amy Thomas
Joe Thomas
Kelly Tobin
Jennifer Turck
Eugene Yarussi

If you prefer to receive the digital version of this publication, or wish to be removed from the mailing list, please contact Bob Brazill at 607-272-5891 x 224 or bobb@racker.org



**988 3-DIGIT
MENTAL HEALTH LINE**



OUR MISSION:

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

EDITOR Bob Brazill, Director of Community Relations & Development
DESIGN Mac Myers, New Media Specialist
CONTRIBUTORS Bob Brazill, Kaitlyn Dennehy, Cris Donovan, Mac Myers, Joshua Skellett, Corey Smith, Sarah Tarrow & Emily Thomas
PHOTOGRAPHY Racker Staff & Friends of Racker