How can there be a “new normal”, when there was never an “old normal”. No one is the same, we are all different and yes, we are living in a different world now. Life creates change, change creates challenges, and therefore there will need to be different behaviors in our efforts to survive and prevail, allowing us to lead the best life possible.

I have never known the meaning of normal and never will, so please stop with this “new normal” nonsense! People with disabilities, those who have friends or family members with disabilities, or who work in the field and care about people, know there is no such thing as normal. God, nature, or mankind; isn’t that what makes us who and what we are? I beg you to show me someone or something that is normal?
Most times I feel there is usually some good that comes from bad events or situations. Will we have more respect for health care workers, first responders, gas station attendants, truck drivers, grocery store workers, etc.? I hope so. I feel strongly that my respect for people comes naturally, and I have been lucky that I always enjoyed being around people, and look for the good in people no matter how different we all are. I am a believer that people make the world go around not money! We will see if these times we are living in makes us stronger and better, I hope that is something positive that comes from this!

A downer for me is not seeing my friends and colleagues who are my family. I miss not anticipating what good things lie ahead, those things or happenings that can be the next day, week or month. I miss making plans involving something that is either positive, relaxing, or just good for my soul. A real negative not to ignore is loss of life, our lives are short and tough enough, let alone dealing with something so unpredictable and out of our control that takes those we love away from us.

When this is over we will have more leaders and individuals appreciating what they have. Our freedom has been taken away from us to keep each other safe and well. People with disabilities and their families are traditionally excellent planners, I think what we are dealing with now will make us even stronger and I feel many others can learn from those of us who have to plan every day to be ready for the challenges that occur on a daily bases.

Even though there has been loss and that is undeniably tragic, we will come out the other side, I hope better for it. It’s about fighting, not giving up and being the best you can be and I guarantee that will wear off onto others. “Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”

Scott Elliott, Executive Director of Progressive Center for Independent Living reflecting on the effects of COVID.
I send kudos to my colleague who so eloquently shared his perspective through the eyes, heart and soul of a person living with a disability. I echo a hopeful outcome to how we respond long-term to the COVID-19 life changing event.

It needs to be said, though, that we have to re-emphasize and re-dedicate ourselves to understanding, to helping and to allowing expressions of loss, of grief and of bereavement. Whether they are out-in-the-open or kept-inside feelings, the sadness this situation may present to us is palpable. The loss of family, friends, colleagues and just the sheer numbers of those who have died as the result of the virus is unfathomable. Whether it is the hidden losses of routine, of relationships, of jobs, of recreation and leisure through sports or entertainment, the absence of family gatherings - the list goes on - we should acknowledge the experience is real and it is okay to feel what one may be feeling.

If your mental well-being is being challenged and you are having feelings you cannot quite comprehend, share with someone. Know you can turn to family, friends, and confidants or you can reach out to mental health professionals by calling New Jersey MentalHealthCares Helpline at 866-202-HELP (4357) or by visiting www.njmentalhealthcares.org.

My final note is one of hope. In a collection of quotes I keep, this one resonates perfectly with this situation we are all experiencing.

“Hope is not pretending that troubles don’t exist. It is the hope that they won’t last forever. That hurts will be healed and difficulties overcome. That we will be led out of the darkness and into the sunshine.”
—Unknown

Pass it on!!
HOW TO MAKE SURE YOU GET YOUR COVID STIMULUS CHECK

What is the Stimulus check?
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government recently passed a bill known as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). This law helps individual Americans who may be experiencing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. Part of the law includes funding to make direct payments to individuals. Individuals whose income is under $75,000 will receive $1,200 plus $500 for each qualifying child dependent. Individuals whose income is between $75,000 and $99,000 will receive a partial stimulus payment and individuals whose income is over $99,000 will not be eligible for a payment. Married couples whose income is under $150,000 will receive $2,400 plus $500 for each qualifying child dependent. Married couples whose income is between $150,000 and $198,000 will receive a partial stimulus payment and couples whose income is over $198,000 will not be eligible for a payment. Income calculations will be based on your 2019 federal tax return, if filed, or your 2018 tax return, if your 2019 has not yet been filed.

How do I ensure I get the Stimulus check?
For individuals who filed either a 2018 or 2019 federal income tax return, the IRS will calculate and automatically send the payment to the direct deposit account or address, if you elected against direct deposit, on file with the IRS based on your most recent return. If you did not elect direct deposit and your address has changed since your filing, you can obtain the change of address form at www.irs.gov.

If you are not normally required to file a tax return, the IRS and Social Security Administration have stated that those receiving Social Security Disability, Retirement, or Railroad Retirement, and SSI recipients who do not file tax returns do not have to take any additional steps. These individuals will have their stimulus checks automatically sent to same account or address as their Social Security Disability, SSI or Retirement or Railroad Retirement checks. However, if the recipient has a child dependent, they will need to take additional steps like other non-filers, as outlined below, in order to receive the dependent stimulus payment of $500.

Other non-filers, such as Veterans Benefits recipients, or individuals who simply have low earnings, will need to enter their information on the non-filer portal available at www.irs.gov/coronavirus/non-filers-enter-payment-info-here. To ensure prompt receipt of your stimulus check, in the manner in which you chose, complete the online form. You will need to prepare some information and provide documentation. A list of that can be found on the IRS Website.

Lastly, the IRS has began payments as of the printing of this article. The IRS is also in the process of making available a tool to check the status of your payment. Once published, you can access the payment status tool by selecting “Get My Payment” at www.irs.gov/coronavirus/economic-impact-payments.
Protecting Your Stimulus Check.
As explained above, the CARES Act, provides for payments to individuals to pay for food, rent, utilities, medicine, and other basic necessities. The CARES Act protects stimulus checks from being reduced to pay certain debts owed to federal and state governments, other than child support. However, the Act does not specifically address garnishment or bank offsets for other debts such as credit card and medical bill judgments. Because of this it is important to know that the stimulus money can be taken from your bank account if your account is levied upon pursuant to a state court judgment for a credit card, medical bill, or other debt.

At present, the stimulus payments are scheduled to be automatically deposited into the accounts of all individuals who receive their Social Security Disability or Retirement by direct deposit, and there is no opt-out to receive a paper check posted on the IRS website. Creditors are aware that the stimulus payments are being sent out, and may be trying to seize those funds to pay their judgments. If you are aware of state court judgment creditors that have or may attempt to levy upon your bank account, you should quickly withdraw the stimulus payment upon receipt, or consider using the stimulus payment to pay bills that you know are coming due in the near future. So long as your account contains no more than two months’ worth of your federal benefit payment amount, it should be protected from levy.

Will my Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Medicaid be affected by the Stimulus payment?
SSI, Medicaid, or other means-tested government benefit will not be affected by the stimulus payment.

Timing
The IRS has stated that for individuals who are receiving paper checks, it may take up to five (5) months to receive their stimulus. For individuals receiving direct deposits, the IRS has begun making payments.

Central Jersey Legal Services
CJLS’s attorneys and paralegals assist individuals facing problems with Medicaid eligibility, government entitlements, housing issues such as eviction, divorce and child support, and consumer debt issues, among many others. All people, regardless of their financial situation, deserve a fair shot at justice – and that requires legal help. It’s not justice. Central Jersey Legal Services provides access to legal help and information for clients in life-changing legal situations who could not otherwise afford an attorney.

If you need legal help, please contact our Mercer County office at 609-695-6249 to be screened for eligibility.

The purpose of this article is to present a general overview of how to obtain and protect your economic stimulus check. It is not intended to be used as legal advice. Each client’s case is unique and merits individual substantive and procedural legal advice from an attorney.

This article was authored by Ryann M. Siclari, Esquire, and Daniel I. Rubin, Esquire, both senior staff attorneys and Marissa Fisher, a paralegal at Central Jersey Legal Services.
Hello everyone. I hope that you are all happy and healthy as you read this article. Certainly the events that have unfolded over the last weeks have forced all of us to change our plans and routines and make the best of a challenging situation. It is because of this that I would not only like to recap the things the Community Connections Recreation Program has done over the past few months and give you a glimpse of what changes we’ve made to our future events, but also give you a peek into what some individuals have been doing on their own time! Their ability to adapt to the changes and find new ways to pass the time or rekindle old passions is truly inspiring. They have taken what would have been negative and turned it into something positive, taking advantage of having more time at home than they expected. These special activities are helping to get folks through a tough time and it something I feel is very worth sharing.

Back in January of 2020 we hosted our annual Game & Pizza Night at Project Freedom of Lawrenceville! Every winter we put together this fun evening of games, pizza and laughs, and every year the attendance grows. This year we had over forty people attend! Participants enjoyed games like Yatzee, Jenga, and Trouble to name just a few.

Participants pose around a game table at our Annual Pizza and Game Night Get-Together after finishing up a round of the classic game of Trouble!
In February we went to a nature presentation at the Tulpehawking Nature Center. This presentation featured several naturalists, including a curator from the Ben Franklin Museum, describing the observations of past and present scholars who study the Abbott Marshlands focusing specifically on reptiles and amphibians. It was fascinating to learn about the creatures that live in our own backyards!

In March we had set up to go see Disney on Ice, an activity that proved to be wildly popular! However, as we all know, things took a hard-left turn and we were forced to cancel the outing among several other events that we already had on the schedule.

Once the initial shock of it all wore off, our team got together and began brainstorming how we could still serve our PCIL Members and frequent Community Connections Recreation Program participants and that is when the Virtual Program was born! Until the Stay-at-Home orders are lifted we will continue to host weekly Virtual Recreation Events accessible by Zoom on your computer or phone. Information for these events can be found on our website under the events tab, or on our facebook page! If you haven’t visited either one lately, we highly recommend it as both are teeming with helpful information, documents, and event links to help you get through this pandemic more easily!

Upcoming VIRTUAL REC PROGRAM EVENT SCHEDULE

Fridays from 1:30 - 3:00 on Zoom
(‘Free Internet Virtual Meeting Program’)

May 8   Caricature Drawing
May 15  Craft Time
May 22   Chair Yoga
May 29   Improv with The SKIT Program

To register for each event please email Reed at reed.thomas@pcil.org
March, as we all know, is when our usual patterns in life came to a screeching halt and we were forced to cancel plans, adhere to social-distancing protocols and wash our hands more frequently than ever - COVID-19 had come to the US and it hit hard. We were forced to alter our lifestyle and quickly adapt to new schedules. We were sent home to work and attend school and just be by ourselves while we waited out the virus. None of us really expected the impact this virus has had, nor had we really anticipate just how long this “new way of life” was going to last. This has put all of us in a strange position, so I want to share with you here, what some of us are doing to pass the time, clear our minds, and stay healthy & positive during these unprecedented times.

My biggest adjustment, other than adjusting to working from home, came with not being able to meet up with my bandmates. Many of you know I’m a musician and often my free time is spent practicing or playing in several bands. Social distancing measures have put a halt on any jam sessions and although all my band members agree that we all miss playing together, I chose to make some lemonade out of the COVID lemons, and revisited an old guitar refurbishing project that I had started in 2019, but never finished. This project has given me the opportunity to concentrate on something positive, something constructive, and lets me go to a place where the anxieties surrounding me (and everyone else) are not there, at least for a time. I can’t wait until such a time where I might be able to play it for all of you!
FORWARD by Progressive Center: One place, many services.

PATRICE IS BUILDING

Patrice J has made use of her time by spending it on one of her favorite projects, PTown. PTown is an extensive model train set up that she has spent many hours lovingly crafting and building. Coronavirus may have ground our towns to a near-halt, but it was a blessing to the residents of PTown!

NATALIE IS ONLINE

Natalie J has turned to online resources to keep her busy. Her favorite online activities include crossword puzzles, watching daily zoo videos, video chatting with her “Sidekicks” (her community support workers), and reading articles or books. She has even participated in some online group activities like yoga, art, and dancing to eighties hit songs with Pals People on Zoom and making music together with Jim Graven on Face Time. Additionally, she has also enjoyed quite a few family movie nights with lots & lots of popcorn! One thing for sure is that the internet has become a go-to for many of us to escape the loneliness and boredom that can come with the stay-at-home order.
Kelly K, who has always been a gifted artist, is using her time to paint some amazing watercolors like the ones pictured below. These are gorgeous and we are happy to be able to share her talents with all of you! Painting is a great way to relax the mind and express your emotions.

Amy C spends her time weaving. It is not just something she enjoys, but it is also an activity that lets her spend more time with her mom. Her mother has been sewing for many years, and Amy’s weaving loom is set up in their sewing room so they can spend quality time with one another, doing things they both enjoy. It is important to find activities to do with loved ones during this time if possible!
Find joy in the morning, when the world begins to wake
Find joy pondering over coffee, your hopes & dreams so new
Find joy in the learning & growing
Find joy in the knowing & not knowing
Find joy in this creative process
Find joy in learning from others, the thoughts & dreams they share
Find joy in being in nature, and the beauty all around you
Find joy in being with others, let the positivity surround you
Find joy in whatever you choose to do
And know you can access the great potential within you.

Jennifer is an avid animal lover. She and her mother, Anne, shelter pets regularly to prevent them from being euthanized and help them find loving homes. It is no surprise that during her free time she is painting bird houses for the birds that frequent her yard.

Always a very socially-conscious person, Anne has elected to use her sewing skills to help others by sewing masks for the Mercer Mask Project. The Mercer Mask Project is a grassroots effort that originated on Facebook, where volunteers distribute materials, sew masks, and bring them to where they are needed. If you want to find out more about the project please visit: www.facebook.com/MercerMaskProject

Tina P. is spending time on the things that make her happy and bonding with her family. Together they have been cooking, baking, doing puzzles, walking, reading, and listening to podcasts. One of Tina’s favorite activities is writing poetry. She finds positivity in writing poetry and is able to reflect on her emotions during this unique time.

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Strength IN US ALL

It’s truly wonderful to see people making the best of a bad situation, staying positive, picking old projects back up, starting new ones, and even helping their communities. I know there are many thousands more who have done similar things and I wish we could showcase them all. If the Coronavirus has demonstrated anything, it is the strength of the human spirit. In the face of uncertainty, danger, fear, and anxiety, regular people are able to find inner strength, maintain positivity, and persevere. I hope everyone reading this has been able to find their strength, move forward in a positive way, and handle whatever recent events have thrown at them. As impressive and inspiring as the stories shared here are, I hope this will be the last time we have to report on positivity in the face of crisis. I wish you all good health and good fortune, and I applaud the strength you’ve found to thrive in the face of this situation.

Be well.

JUST MAKE Lemonade & BREATHE

All this talk of making lemonade out of lemons has got us thirsty, so we’ve decided to share a recipe for homemade lemonade. Make sure to share a photo with us of you making your lemons into lemonade - and keep being positive!

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 3/4 cups sugar
- 1 cup water
- 7-8 lemons, squeezed
- 7-8 cups water

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Make a simple syrup. In a small saucepan, boil 1 cup of water and add 1 3/4 cups sugar. Stir until completely dissolved, then remove from heat and cool to room temperature. Once cooled, chill in the fridge. Squeeze 7-8 lemons to get 1 1/2 cups of lemon juice. Add the pulp to the lemon juice, but take out and toss any seeds. Add the lemon juice to a pitcher, and stir in the chilled simple syrup and 7-8 cups of water (depending on taste; the more water, the less sweet the lemonade.) Serve over ice, and add a lemon slice or mint sprig for garnish.
Baseball is very important to me. Normally I would watch New York Yankee games on TV, attend Trenton Thunder and Scranton Rail Riders games, and even play on my Challenger League team. However, all of this has been delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This is very disappointing for me and a lot of other fans, but it very important to the players, coaching staff, and fans that everyone stays home until this outbreak ends.

We were all looking forward to the new baseball season. In the Eastern League, the Trenton Thunder team had scheduled Dash, the new bat dog, to make several appearances at regular home games before undergoing further training at the Green Leaf Pet Resort, but that has been cancelled. The American League New York Yankees’s new pitcher, Garrett Cole, was due to make his 2020 season debut, but now that has been delayed. We do not know when teams will begin their season. Hopefully, if all goes well, all teams will either start playing in late May or early June.

In the meantime, there are a few options out there for some us to enjoy just a little baseball! You can see simulated games on SimMatchup.com. The “SimPhillies” have already played the “SimDiamonbacks” and lost six to five.

Baseball organizers have started to make proposals for being able to open the season. One plan for now is to have both minor and major league baseball teams play regular season games or seven inning double headers games in Florida and Arizona without fans to eliminate travel and the risk of exposure to the coronavirus. Another proposal is to start the season in mid-July and extend the playoffs through November.

We hope baseball will be in full swing again as soon as possible, but until then, stay safe and be healthy!

Kwesi Posipanko
My name is Robert Jackson. The purpose of me sharing my story is to let everyone know that despite any obstacles life, you can set your own successful path. I was born with severe jaundice, echolalia, and a hypoxic brain injury at birth due to lack of oxygen to the brain. Later during my childhood, I suffered from traumatic brain injury as a result of a fall down accident and multiple auto and school bus accidents. At age 9 I was bitten by a tick and ended up with Lyme Disease. I didn’t receive any treatment because no knew to much about Lyme Disease back in the 1980s. In 1989 I had a psychiatric evaluation done by the child study team at Trenton Public Schools where I was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-NOS. To this day, I still experience chronic fatigue, memory loss, difficulty with reading comprehension, audio processing issues, tingling and burning sensations after walking for long periods of time, brain fog, blurred vision, communication, etc.

During my school years from kindergarten to the 12th grade, I was placed in special education classes because it was very difficult for me to function in a general education classroom. I was classified as Preschool Handicapped at age 4, afterwards I was classified as Multiple Handicapped until graduation. All of my classes were self-contained and in one classroom throughout the whole day, with the exception of physical education, electives, and speech therapy. When I turned 16, I took classes at Mercer County Technical Schools in the Career Orientation Program, which is a half day program for special needs students and I spent the other half of the day at home-school. I made the honor roll. However, during my last few years in high school, I always felt inferior because I wasn’t being
challenged enough. School personnel thought it would be in my best interest to stay in school until I was 21. My mother felt that it wasn’t necessary and pulled me out at age 18. I graduated with a special education certificate and a high school diploma. Navigating where to turn for support as an adult was difficult and challenging. After leaving school I went on several job interviews, but never landed any positions. Realizing I didn’t learn the proper skills for an entry-level job or even college, I went to the NJ Division of Vocational Rehab for help, but it was unsuccessful. The job didn’t work out and I quit. I’ve had at least 20 different jobs mainly in fast food restaurants, department stores, supermarkets, and temp agencies. The wages weren’t enough for me to live off of leading me to continue to live with my mom.

In 1999 I attempted to go to college at Mercer County Community College to major in Computer Systems and Networking. I scored very low on the placement test and had to take remedial courses. While I was attending college, I began to have frequent headaches every day, meltdowns, and very nervous. I didn’t realize that this wasn’t the right path for me until my Algebra professor advised me to try another career path that didn’t require college. Ultimately the second semester was the worst for me to be placed on academic probation, so I decided not to continue my college career.

Despite all of the up and downs that I’ve encountered during my lifetime, finally there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and I got the opportunity to work for the State of New Jersey, starting out in the Department of Treasury.

As the years went on, I’ve taken advantage of a variety of opportunities. For example, I’ve taken free online courses and enrolled in a mentoring program that ran from January 2018 to June 2018. Later I decided that I didn’t want to stay with the Department of Treasury anymore so, in February 2019, I decided that I wanted to help people like myself who have encountered the same obstacles in life become the best they can be. I began to look for job opportunities in the departments that served the disabled population and after meeting with Paul Aronshon, Ombudsman for the Office of Intellectual Disabilities and Their Families to express interest in working with the disabled, I felt that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Networking with people who work in the Human Services field helped me land my current position at the NJ Department of Human Services Division of Developmental Disabilities, Employment and Transition to 21. I’ll be giving presentations at schools, colleges, supported employment agencies about the services that DDD offers, navigating the developmental disability system, and other duties as time goes on.

My message to any parent who has a special needs child or a disabled adult is that there are services that can enable you to help with life in general. If you want something you have to stop feeling sorry for yourself, work hard for it and be diligent in wanting to succeed. That’s all there is to it. I hope my story can help other people. Robert Jackson
MEDICAID PROGRAMS: A SIMPLE SUMMARY

By Ryann M. Siclari of Central Jersey Legal Services.

There are many programs that fall under the umbrella known as Medicaid or New Jersey Family Care. Each program has different eligibility criteria. This article is intended to give you a brief, simplified overview of the programs; but make no mistake, the analysis is often complicated. As such, if you believe you may be Medicaid eligible, I encourage you to contact Central Jersey Legal Services for assistance in applying these factors to your unique circumstances.

Affordable Care Act Medicaid (ACA)
In order to be eligible for ACA Medicaid, you must be between 19 and 64 and not already be receiving Medicare. The reason is there are other Medicaid programs that cover those under 19 or those over 64. There is no resource test for this program so the amount of money you have in the bank does not affect your eligibility. There is an income limit that is 138% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) based on household size. For a single person, the limit is $1,468 per month in 2020. and have both Medicare and Medicaid. In order to meet the financial criteria for the program, an individual must have monthly gross income at or below 100% FPL which for a single person in 2020 is $1,067. With respect to assets, a single person has a resource limit of $4,000 and a couple has a resource limit of $6,000.

Workability
NJ Workability is full New Jersey Medicaid health coverage for disabled individuals who are working. An individual between the ages of 16 and 64 is eligible for NJ Workability if he or she has a permanent disability determined by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and works part time, full time, or is self-employed, and able to prove employment. Individuals may have Medicaid as their sole insurance or they may be dual eligible. Financially, the maximum gross income for an individual is 250% of the federal poverty level which is $2,659 per month. Social Security benefits received by an individual on their own account are not included in the eligibility criteria and are considered disregarded income. If their Social Security is from a parent’s earning record, individuals can still qualify as long as their Social Security benefit does not exceed 100% FPL, which for 2020 is $1,067 for an individual. Individuals are allowed to keep a maximum of $20,000.00 in assets while couples are allowed to keep a maximum of $30,000.00 in assets. Funds in an IRA or 401k are not counted.
Managed Long Term Services and Supports (MLTSS)
MLTSS refers to the delivery of long term care services through managed care organizations. Approval for MLTSS is a two-prong process: an applicant must be medically (i.e. clinically) and financially eligible. Medicaid will send a nurse to assess you, whether you are home or in a facility, to see if you meet nursing facility of care, which is, defined as needing assistance in three (3) or more activities of daily living. Financially, the individual must meet the income and resource tests. The income limit is 300% FPL which is $2,349 in 2020. However, if the applicant is over the income limit, they can use a Qualified Income Trust to qualify. The resource limit for a single person in New Jersey is $2,000.00. Some resources, such as the home you live in or one automobile are exempt. There are additional complicated rules for both income and resources where there is a spouse. The most unique and complicated part of MLTSS eligibility is the lookback period and transfer penalty. When an individual applies for Medicaid, they must provide bank statements for the lookback period, which is 60 months. If there has been an improper transfer of assets during the lookback period, a period of ineligibility will be imposed.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
Medicaid / Disabled Adult Child (DAC)
Unlike all of the other Medicaid programs previously mentioned, SSI Medicaid does not require an application with the county board of social services. If you are eligible for SSI, you are automatically eligible for Medicaid with no further action needed on your part. Individuals who collect SSI, do not have enough work credits to be eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) on their own work history. In addition to requiring a disability determination, SSI has income and resource limits to be eligible. Your income must be under the SSI benefit rate, $783 per month in 2020, and your assets must be below $2,000. Many times, a person who is collecting SSI may become eligible to SSDI under a parent’s work record once that parent retires, becomes disabled, or passes away. Once an individual transitions from SSI to SSDI under a parent’s work record, they are known as a disabled adult child (DAC). If the only reason the individual is no longer eligible for SSI Medicaid is because they are collecting SSDI under a parent’s work record, then they will get to keep their Medicaid eligibility as a DAC even though their income exceeds the SSI eligibility threshold.

Central Jersey Legal Services provides access to legal help for clients in legal situations who could not otherwise afford an attorney.
If you need legal help, or have questions about this article, please contact our Mercer County office at 609-695-6249 to be screened for eligibility.
As most of you are aware, PCIL offers a variety of exceptional services for students that have disabilities. One of these services, Gateways to Success, is offered to high school students between the ages of 16-21. The program is designed to prepare its participants for competitive integrated employment and/or post-secondary education. This is done by having groups of students meet once a week for 12 weeks in a classroom setting. The sessions are led by an instructor from PCIL who assists the students with identifying their career preferences based on their interests and abilities. A plan of action is then developed which includes the preparation needed to enter that chosen career. Upon finishing the classroom sessions, the students are then assisted in searching for and applying for summer internships.

In the early part of 2020, the Gateways to Success program identified four groups of students from four different high schools located in Mercer and Hunterdon County. The students and instructors were excited to officially begin the program the first week of March. Just as the sessions were getting underway, and the groups were growing accustomed to meeting in person each week, the world threw a curve ball in the form of a nasty pandemic. In an attempt to slow the pandemic’s spread, the students were asked by their high schools to refrain from coming to school to ensure their safety. PCIL’s instructors were also told to work from home until further notice. The Gateways to Success Program seemed to be stopped in its tracks. But, as it became clearer that schools everywhere were going to have students utilize online learning to continue with their studies, PCIL realized the same format could be used for the Gateways Program! Specifically, an online service called Zoom was chosen. Zoom allows for the groups to continue the sessions using video conferences, where students and instructors see each other in a live setting. Zoom not only enables the students to continue focusing on their future goals, but is also helping them build upon traits such as flexibility, diligence, and dedication. All of which are vital to have in any type of workplace. Zoom is helping PCIL take the necessary precautions to keep the students and instructors safe, as this is the number one priority. It also empowers us to continue encouraging hope for the future, as this is just as important.

Lauren Gosciniak and Laura Tapp
Meet the Newest Staff

MEET DAMONIQUE

Hello! My name is DaMonique Walker and I joined the staff here at PCIL in January 2020. I am the new Transition Specialist/RAMP Instructor. I attended Rutgers in 2017 where I received my Master’s degree in Clinical Social Work. In my professional career, I have traveled on many different career paths, but my heart’s passion always leads me back to helping individuals in need. I have had the opportunity to work with individuals with developmental disabilities, kids with behavioral issues and I was even fortunate enough to complete an internship with the Juvenile Justice Commission working in a Level 3 Medium Secure Facility, or “youth jail” for some time. I have enjoyed my journey and all of the struggles that have come along the way because it has shaped me into the person that PCIL saw fit to work with the youth in the RAMP program. I look forward to building strong trustworthy relationships with the students and hopefully, I will be able to leave an everlasting impact on them when they transition on to bigger and better opportunities.

MEET EDSON

My name is Edson St. Juste and I joined the Progressive Center for Independent Living in January 2020. I’m the new Transition Specialist/Mentor Coordinator for the RAMP, GATEWAY, and CRISP programs. I attended Fairleigh Dickinson University where I received my Bachelor degree in Business & Technology. I’m currently in my last semester at Wilmington University completing my Master of Science in Human Service in Administration with a certificate in Case Management. In my professional career, I have worked in banking and Higher Education. But my passion has always to give back to the people who need guidance and an advocate. Having the opportunity to work for an organization to make a positive impact has been a very rewarding experience for me personally. In my spare time, I enjoy spending time with family & friends. I love to travel, and attend sporting events such as basketball and football.
In Memory of Pete Frates

South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, political leader and philanthropist Nelson Mandela was correct when he once stated “What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.” Mandela also once said “The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling but in rising every time we fall.” By both of these definitions of life ALS Ice Bucket Challenge inventor Peter Frates had lived a very meaningful, significant, successful and productive life. Whether through his role as an athlete, a leader, a teammate, a philanthropist, or in his private life as a family member, Peter made a positive impact on many people, helping them overcome adversity, build connections to people affected by ALS, succeed in life despite their disabilities and other setbacks, inspire people to try to find cures for many diseases and medical conditions regarded as terminal in 2019 and 2020, and live better and more independent lives.

Sadly, Peter passed away peacefully on Monday December 9th, 2019 at age 34 surrounded by his loving family due to complications with ALS. There are many virtuous qualities that made Peter so special. The best thing about Peter was that he never complained about his life being harder or wallowed in self-pity despite being afflicted with ALS. Instead he used his terminal illness as an opportunity and inspiration to help other terminal illness patients and their families. This inspired him to create the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge to help use social media fundraising and global donations to help people receive better access to quality and affordable ALS care, genetic discovers about ALS, ALS treatments and, hopefully someday, a cure to eradicate and defeat ALS once and for all. As we enter the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 2020, trying to find a cure to combat and defeat this dreaded and deadly disease is an important part of disability rights because it will help many people afflicted with ALS and other physical disabilities try to have opportunities to live better lives as well as honor the legacies of great people who have died from ALS such as English astrophysicist Stephen Hawking and cartoonist and SpongeBob SquarePants creator Stephen Hillenburg.

I have no doubt that there are many people who echo the sentiments expressed here in my third article to PCIL’s quarterly newsletter. And I am confident that we will be someday be able to defeat ALS once and for all to avenge the victims who died from this dreaded and deadly disease. Everyone should be inspired by Peter Frates life of service to his community, his drive to help others because it is the right thing to do, and his courage to overcome adversity and start the efforts needed to really make a difference and help others in need.

Richard Ni
We’ve already covered how disruptive COVID-19 has been, not only to our recreation program, but also to everyone’s ability to connect to one another. We are lucky to live in a time where technology exists, and is accessible enough, to combat that disruption. Software like Skype, Zoom, Google Duo, Facetime, and others allow us to interact with others, without the risk of close personal contact. When it became apparent that the interruption to our recreation activities would be longer-term than we first thought, we opted to turn to Zoom, a free, easy to use, virtual meeting app which is available for computers, tablets, and smart phones.

I’ll readily admit to being really nervous, and uncomfortable with the changes and challenges this shift in program operation presented. We put quite a bit of time in running internal test sessions among our employees, and the activity presenters, to make sure we understood how the software worked, what features it included, and how those features could enhance the experience we wanted folks to have. Much behind-the-scenes planning went into how people would be informed of our plans, how these new sessions would flow, what activities would translate well to this new format, and who would be identified to lead these new activities.

Even after as much thought and effort we could put into this, I still clearly recall having butterflies in my stomach while logging in as meeting host for the first session (an art lesson led by cartoonist Ken Wilkie). As people joined the meeting I went over and over my plan inside my head, being sure to hit all of the points I planned, while at the same time trying to judge in real-time whether or not those points were having the desired effect!

I am happy to say that these virtual gatherings are proving to be very enjoyable for all involved. There was a conscious effort to encourage interaction, to provide opportunity for participants to meet new people, engage with old friends, and continue to strengthen their social connections, while having a fun experience. Is it identical to our in-community gatherings? No. Will it replace them on a permanent basis? No. Will we continue using a virtual platform in addition to community outings? Maybe, only time will tell. I can say that I get a similar sense of connection among the participants, despite not occupying the same physical space. I have received some very positive feedback, and we are seeing many repeat participants.

I am happy that we have all adapted and been able to find work-arounds to adjust to changing times. I am proud to still be a part of offering opportunities to connect to other people and develop stronger social networks, despite the current challenges. And I am impressed by the can-do spirit everyone displays. There is no complaining about less-than-ideal circumstances, just a bunch of people hanging out, having fun, and getting to know each other better.

— Reed Thomas
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