Sunny Days for Students with Disabilities

*TODAY’s “Puppy with a Purpose” embarks on a life-changing journey as the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center’s first facility dog.*

Our newest employee has just a few requirements while on the job — a handler, a leash, and a pouch full of kibble. But in the months since Sunny, a highly adept one-and-a-half-year-old Yellow Labrador Retriever, permanently joined the Viscardi team as our facility dog, his tail wags and paw shakes have been making a big impact on the lives of 170 children at the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center.

Before earning his Viscardi ID badge, Sunny captured the hearts of viewers across the nation as the “Puppy with a Purpose” on NBC’s TODAY, which chronicled his training over the course of 16 months with the Guide Dog Foundation. It was announced live in June that he would be starting his next adventure, working alongside a staff member to enhance the learning experience for young people with severe physical disabilities who often require consistent, life-sustaining medical treatment.

“When kids are comfortable, they learn better,” says Angelo Zegarelli, Head of School at the Henry Viscardi School. “As part of our social-emotional learning curriculum, Sunny helps our students get acclimated to their environment and manage their stress levels throughout the day.”

According to Zegarelli, having a facility dog around urges students to meet personal goals and focus on their work. Third-grader Ryan has been pushing himself to walk longer distances in physical therapy with Sunny by his side. Second graders are eager to read challenging books aloud when Sunny visits their classroom. Eighth-grader Perla says spending moments with Sunny in between bell rings makes her feel less stressed about her responsibilities.

“Sunny has this natural way of keeping students calm and relaxed so they can be their best, whether that involves memory recall during an exam or expanding vocabulary in speech therapy,” says Zegarelli. “In fact, having him around motivates us all — and that includes students, staff, and faculty.”

Get to know more about Sunny and his impact at The Viscardi Center by following @ViscardiCenter on Instagram!
“…And they asked me if I would Do a little number And I sang with all my might... Walking in Memphis”

Kodi Lee, the winner of this season’s America’s Got Talent, sang those lyrics with all his might at the 2019 Disability:IN Conference. I know. I had the distinct pleasure of following this musical prodigy on stage. My first reaction, spoken directly to the large audience, was “Really!? I’m following an extraordinary performer who just brought the house down! REALLY? How do I do that?!” Quickly, I realized Kodi was the perfect segue for the message I had planned to deliver to the crowd who had come to learn how to enhance their companies’ disability-inclusion practices.

“Aren’t we all enriched by being in the presence of Kodi tonight? To have people with disabilities, people of color, people of different sexual orientations, people from different parts of this beautiful world, in your lives every day?” I asked. Of course, we are! Kodi’s blindness and autism haven’t diminished his contributions that enrich his or our lives. Our fascination and genuine appreciation of Kodi has nothing to do with his disability and everything to do with his talent. That’s how it should be.

All of us have a contribution to make. Society needs to accept it.

Simon Cowell noted after Kodi’s audition performance that he didn’t know what it was like to live in Kodi’s world, but that he would remember that moment for the rest of his life.

We may well never know what it’s like to live in another’s world, but it’s time we all open our minds and hearts to create a world steeped in acceptance so we can all reap the benefits of everyone’s contribution.

President & CEO

Printing Success

Our Enterprise Office Services program in partnership with Canon Solutions America is on a roll! The latest cohort completed their training by holding a demo day, during which they presented advanced printing techniques to Center staff. After demonstrating their mastery of office admin skills, the group sat down for mock interviews, then received guidance on developing a realistic career plan. Taught by a national team of subject matter experts from Viscardi and Canon, this five-week vocational program provides training in reception, mail services, print fleet management, and more.

Igniting Entrepreneurship

Looking to turn your brilliant business idea into a reality? The Viscardi Center has unveiled its National Center for Disability Entrepreneurship (NCDE), a powerful resource for self-starters with disabilities, including veterans, who want to be their own boss. This fully accessible program is designed to guide aspiring entrepreneurs through every stage of launching a successful startup — from assessing trends, to devising a strong marketing strategy, to building a cohesive business plan.

Growing Opportunities

A true farm-to-table initiative! Viscardi-grown cucumbers were sold across Long Island this past summer on the Fresh Truck Mobile Farmers Market run by Family Residences and Essential Enterprises. The market delivered fresh produce to underserved residents in 12 communities in Nassau and Suffolk. Each year, our campus garden — supported by Smile Farms, a nonprofit connecting adults with disabilities to meaningful work in agricultural settings — produces a plentiful harvest and paid employment for up to ten participants in our Youth Transition Services.
Meet Laura
Thriving as a Life-Long Learner

After Laura graduated from the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center and moved on from the traditional education system, she and her family sought a program that would encourage her to remain active and continue learning. They found what they were looking for this year when Viscardi launched its new Center-based BRIDGE program, which offers young adults over 21 with varying care needs the opportunity to focus on a diverse range of activities that enhance skills development.

Laura, who uses a speech-generating device to communicate, credits BRIDGE for getting her up and out each morning. Encouraged by staff to voice her opinions and be her own advocate, she feels more socially stimulated and independent than she was before starting the program.

“My peers and I have been much happier since joining BRIDGE. We like sharing ideas and planning weekly activities together,” she said. “I have recently been enjoying taking cooking classes, learning to use technology efficiently, and researching topics that interest me.”

Laura says she especially looks forward to Thursdays and Fridays each week, because that’s when the group takes daytrips around Long Island and New York City. On several recent excursions, she had the opportunity to get a look at how different businesses and professionals operate behind-the-scenes. Some highlights include a tour of Etsy’s corporate headquarters, spending an afternoon with the team at John’s Crazy Socks, and attending a taping of one of her favorite shows — Live with Kelly and Ryan.

This fall, options are endless for Laura and her peers as they strategize ways to stay connected with their new contacts and strengthen their network within the local community.

“In the BRIDGE program, we don’t feel restricted just because we have a disability or use a wheelchair. It allows us to be as active as we want to be. Never believe that just because we have a disability, we aren’t able to think outside the box.”

With support from JetBlue, the sky’s the limit for people with disabilities. Not long after hosting an exclusive air travel experience to Boston for graduating seniors of the Henry Viscardi School, the JetBlue Crew let their disability pride soar when walking & rolling with students, alumni, and staff at the 5th annual Disability Pride Parade in New York City.

The Viscardi Center will continue to reach new heights in November. For the third time, Viscardi will be the focus of an in-flight video feature showing on the seatbacks of all JetBlue Airways flights. The clip, produced by students from NYIT, showcases how experiences provided by JetBlue and Viscardi have broadened horizons for students with disabilities. Watch it on YouTube.com/viscardicenter.

NewsBytes

New on the blog: Do you understand your organization’s responsibility to provide accessible digital content? For the lowdown on seven common digital accessibility myths and much more, read our blog at ViscardiCenter.org/viscardi-blog.

AWARDS & ACCOLADES

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ON DISABILITY

We’re on a mission to build better pathways to employment for all. That’s why, with October’s National Disability Employment Awareness Month upon us, The Viscardi Center is exceptionally proud to announce that we have been recognized for the second consecutive year as a Leading Disability Employer by National Organization on Disability (NOD). We join dozens of national organizations and companies honored for demonstrating exemplary hiring and employment practices for people with disabilities.

NOD annually applauds businesses that are leading the way in disability employment and seeks to encourage other employers to tap into the benefits of building a disability inclusive workforce.
Place Your Bets While Sipping Whiskey & Spirits!

Join us for a night of casino-themed fun. Proceeds support employment and youth transition programs and services.

January 16, 2020 at the Cradle of Aviation Museum

For details, call 516.465.1595 or visit ViscardiCenter.org.

YOUR LASTING IMPACT

A smile is an invaluable gift, and with support from Henry Schein, more of us are showing our pearly Whites with confidence. Operating under the philosophy of “doing well by doing good,” Long Island’s largest public company has been instrumental in developing Project Accessible Oral Health (PAOH) at The Viscardi Center, a global initiative addressing the #1 unmet health care need for people with disabilities: access to quality oral health care.

Dentists often lack the training and equipment to accommodate patients with disabilities, and low reimbursement rates from insurance providers can prevent access to adequate treatment. Since 2017, PAOH has acted to improve the overall health of the disability community by educating caregivers and establishing solutions to these long-standing challenges.

Onsite at Viscardi, Henry Schein’s efforts are equally far-reaching. Through Henry Schein Cares, its global corporate social responsibility program, the Henry Viscardi School receives a donation of necessary medical supplies and equipment that nurses and therapists use to assist a diverse student body every day. And it wouldn’t be wheelchair basketball season without a competitive game or two between Henry Schein and the Viscardi Varsity Cougars. Team Schein are good sports as the Cougars, equipped to excel on the court, remain undefeated.

Next spring, The Viscardi Center will shine a spotlight on this evolving partnership. Henry Schein and the contributions of Stanley Bergman, its Chairman of the Board and CEO, are to be honored at our 54th annual Celebrity Sports Night on May 14, 2020.

Don’t miss the action: Stay tuned for exciting updates about Celebrity Sports Night at ViscardiCenter.org/sportsnight!