



## Supporting An Angel

John Ponce, residential supervisor at FREE, supports Special Olympics US gold-medal winner and strongest woman in the world Angel Athenas to achieve her goals. Their relationship is pure gold.

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## Get Together at NYS Parks

September usually marks the unofficial end of the summer, but this year September 7 will offer an awesome opportunity for everyone to Get Together at NYS Parks, an inclusive day of fun filled with activities at select state parks throughout New York State.

Open to people with and without disabilities and their families, the event is co-sponsored by OPWDD, the NYS Department of Parks and Recreation and Special Olympics New York. Get Together Day will feature free admission.

Each of the parks will offer several accessible activities that might include bocce demonstrations, hiking, bird watching, nature walks and more.

Registration is not required to attend. The events will take place from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. Please note: Letchworth State Park will open at 11 a.m.

Be sure to check with your local park and/or visit OPWDD’s website for details about specific activities at each of the parks.

Mark your calendars and Get Together with OPWDD as we close out the summer season.

### Parks that have been selected are:

- **New York City area:** Riverbank State Park
- **Hudson Valley Region :** Franklin D. Roosevelt State Park, Yorktown
- **Capital Region:** John Boyd Thacher State Park
- **Central New York Region:** Green Lakes State Park, Fayetteville
- **Genesee Region:** Letchworth State Park, Castile
- **Western New York:** Buffalo Harbor State Park
- **Long Island:** Sunken Meadow State Park, Kings Park

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# Supporting An Angel



## “Who’s the best?”

### “I AM!”

Those are the words you might hear exchanged between John Ponce and Angel Athenas as John coaches Angel during workouts at the gym.

John is the residential supervisor in the Family Residences and Essential Enterprises’ (FREE) supported apartment where Angel lives with three others on Long Island. He is also somewhat of a gym rat, working out several days per week to maintain his own strength and fitness. Angel showed an interest in going to the gym with John in 2015 they now work out together at two gyms for a total of six days per week, and much of that occurs when John is not on duty.

Angel, 34, is a determined woman who works hard every day to achieve her goals.

It’s that very determination that helped her overcome challenges throughout her life. As a child, she was abandoned by her mother, abused and placed in foster care until Geri Athenas and her husband adopted her at age eight. With the

love, support and stalwart advocacy of Geri, Angel participated in sports in high school, enjoyed a family life she never had, and found new direction through services at FREE and participation in Special Olympics New York.

Angel’s hard work has paid off. The 5’0”, 165 lb. dynamo was invited to compete in this year’s Special Olympics U.S. games in Seattle where she brought home four gold medals in powerlifting and earned the opportunity to represent the United States in the World Games held in Abu Dhabi this past March. Her success continued as she won four gold medals at that event.

Although much of Angel’s success is credited to her dedication to training and her laser focus on her future, credit also goes to John.

“John is my Mickey (Mickey Goldmill, Rocky Balboa’s trainer in the Rocky films). He supports me and pushes me to do my best. He is my role model and I want to be like him one day.”

John said the time spent at the gym with Angel is a valuable tool in

teaching her responsibility, determination, self-respect and self-worth. “It is humbling for me to see how Angel has blossomed,” John said. “And the whole

experience is therapeutic for both of us; I have learned as much from Angel as she has learned from me.”

These fast friends also spend time together outside the gym, enjoying trips to the mall or just hanging out. John likes to hear about Angel’s job at a horse farm, and he encourages her to bring that same determination to her work. Angel hopes one day she can get a job working in a restaurant or at the gym.

John is fiercely proud of all that Angel has accomplished, from changing her eating habits and quitting smoking, to working out at the gym and even gaining more confidence and social skills with the hundreds of people she has met from all over the world. To keep Angel focused, he reminds her, “If you don’t work hard, somebody else is working harder.”

And now John uses just one word to inspire Angel toward her next goal of lifting 400 lbs. The word “Berlin” is symbolic of her desire to represent the United States in the World Games in 2023. With the hard work and determination of this dynamic duo, no doubt Angel make it to Berlin and hopes her coach and friend, John, will be at her side along with her parents. ■

## Keith Caputo: A Man with a Mission

Almost five years ago, Keith Caputo realized that helping other people not only made them happy, but made him happy, too. That's when he founded Helping Makes U Happy, a nonprofit organization in Center Moriches that has helped countless children and families.

Keith and his board of directors accomplish their mission by raising funds, collecting donations of food and clothing, filling backpacks for students, providing prom attire for teens, aiding fire victims, creating comfort cases for children removed from their homes due to neglectful situations and more. The organization's most successful

event is an annual Chinese Auction that raised more than \$36,000 this year. However, the funds never seem to be enough to meet the increasing needs in the community.

This May, that job got a little easier, as Keith's organization was selected as one of five nonprofits, from among 170 that applied, to receive a Long Island Imagine Award, a prestigious award program founded by Kenneth Cerini, managing partner of the accounting firm Cerini & Associates. Along with the honor of receiving the Rising Star Award, the organization received \$5,000.



Cassy and Keith Caputo, center, present Helping Makes U Happy tee shirts to members of the Beach Boys.

In addition, Keith and his organization were recognized a second time when Helping Makes U Happy won the Fan Favorite Award - the first time in the seven-year history of the awards that one organization received multiple awards. Keith received a standing ovation when he came up to accept the award and an additional \$2,500 grant.

Ever the ambassador for Helping Makes U Happy, Keith was caught slipping business cards several times to Gary Puckett of Union Gap fame and Tommy Austin, co-founder of Make-A-Wish Foundation earlier this summer while on a vacation cruise. He also presented members of the Beach Boys with tee shirts from his agency.

Keith's truly a man on a mission; one that makes everyone happy. ■



Master of Ceremonies Doug Geed of News12 (left) with Imagine Awards founder Kenneth Cerini (center) and three of the winners (from left): Ellenmorris Tiegerman of Tiegerman, Keith Caputo of Helping Makes U Happy and Dori Scofield of Paws of War.

WHAT'S YOUR  
SUPER POWER?

TEACH!

LEARN!

CREATE!

SUPPORT!

EXPLORE!

We might not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but we all have a unique strength, skill or ability that makes us "super."

Come and share your "superpower" with OPWDD at the **Great New York State Fair, August 21 to September 2** at the NYS Fairgrounds in Syracuse.

Can't make it to the NYS Fair this year? OPWDD will be inviting people to share their superpower and create their very own superhero name on social media using the hashtag #BeSuper @NYSOPWDD. Look for more info at [opwdd.ny.gov](http://opwdd.ny.gov) later this month. ■





# Everyone Can “Fit It In”

Across the state, employees at OPWDD are enjoying better health - thanks to the “Fit It In” wellness initiative that was launched last fall. Fit It In encourages employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle by eating a balanced diet, exercising, reducing stress and either cutting back on or eliminating habits that can harm health.

Given the program’s popularity among employees, OPWDD is expanding the program to include people receiving supports to encourage a healthier lifestyle.

There’s good reason for that. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that approximately 35% of the general population in the U.S. is obese, while the rate of obesity among adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) is as high as 58.5%. And obesity can mean a greater risk of secondary health conditions that can impair one’s well-being and quality of life.

While all physical activity includes some risk, it can be safe for almost everyone. Not only can activity improve cognition and promote cardiovascular and muscle fitness, it can reduce the risk of developing new conditions. In addition to more physical activity, everyone can achieve health benefits by eating more fruits and vegetables, limiting foods high in fat and sugar, and drinking lots of water.

## According to Health.gov:

- Adults, who are able to, should get at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, such as walking, running, swimming, squats, lunges or biking. Aerobic activity should be performed in episodes of at least 10 minutes, and preferably, be spread throughout the week.

- Adults, who are able to, should also do muscle-strengthening activities two or more days per week. Muscle strengthening involves lifting heavy objects such as weights that develop certain muscle groups or using elastic bands or a person’s own body weight to provide resistance.

- If someone is not able to engage in vigorous or moderate activity, it is recommended that they engage in regular physical activity according to their abilities.
- Everyone should check with their health care providers about the amounts and types of physical activity that is most appropriate for their abilities.

## Fitting It In Across the State

Getting healthy can be a tough job, which is why OPWDD’s Long Island Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Coordinator Linda Courtien challenged staff members to partner with people they support as their “wellness buddies.” This helped staff members encourage each other and the people they support to make healthier choices and to engage in Fit It In themes such as the “Souper Bowl and “Chili Cook Off” which featured hot meals full of nutrition on cold winter days. In April, Long Island employees also participated in the E.J. Autism Foundation Jigsaw Walk during Autism Awareness Month.

On April 1, in anticipation of the warmer spring weather, Andrew DeVirgeles, EAP coordinator at Sunmount, launched a 30-mile challenge and encouraged his coworkers to partner with the people they support to walk 30 miles over the course of a month. In addition, Sunmount promoted healthier



*On Long Island, spring yardwork has many benefits: getting in lots of steps, enjoying fresh air and making the earth a little cleaner.*

lifestyles, such as better nutrition and quitting smoking at events such as their January health fair.

In Norwich, Ilene Cohen helped launch Walking4Wellness, a 150-minute per-week walking program that employees can do on their own, during breaks or at home. The people they support are also encouraged to participate.

Wassiac EAP Coordinator Terry McCormick knows a healthy diet is the key to a healthy lifestyle. That’s why each week she sends out a “healthy meals” email that includes two recipes, some of which are vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free. She makes sure her recipes are easy to follow and can be made with ingredients people will most likely have on-hand. ■



*Spencer Touretz’s weekly trip to the Double “D” Bar Ranch gives him a chance for a little exercise, and helping to feed and care for the animals is a great stress-reliever, too.*

# Marking Important Milestones

This summer marks three important milestones that have paved the way for people with developmental disabilities in New York State to become more fully involved and accepted in their communities.

June 22 marked the 20th anniversary of the historic 1999 *Olmstead v. L.C.* decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states, in accordance with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), have an obligation to provide services to individuals with disabilities in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs.

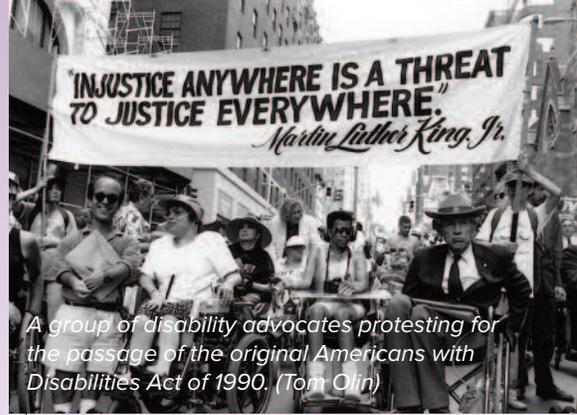
Governor Andrew M. Cuomo created New York's *Olmstead Implementation Plan* in 2012 to identify specific actions state agencies should take to support people with disabilities in the most integrated settings.

Nine years ago on July 13, we celebrated changing the name of our agency to the New York State Office for People With Developmental

Disabilities (OPWDD). The staunch and tireless efforts of advocates brought about the removal of the "R" word from our agency's name and called for communities across New York State to recognize and value the unique contributions people with disabilities make. It is the voices of our advocates that continue to drive our work today as we strive to support a people-first culture in everything we do.

July 26, 2019 is the 29th anniversary of the signing of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Since the groundbreaking legislation was enacted in 1990, we have witnessed change not only in physical environments, but in the inclusion of all Americans no matter what their ability.

The ADA civil rights law prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, promotes accessibility to jobs,



*A group of disability advocates protesting for the passage of the original Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. (Tom Olin)*

schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The world's first comprehensive law guaranteeing equal rights to people with disabilities, the ADA has expanded opportunities for Americans with disabilities by reducing barriers, changing perceptions and increasing full participation in community life.

Although much progress has been made, our work is not done. OPWDD continues its system transformation to ensure that the services that are person-centered; measurable; and meet all of a person's health, behavioral health and developmental disability service needs now and in the future. ■

## Robert Terry: Standing Out and Standing Up

Robert Terry's hard work as a self-advocate for people with developmental disabilities makes him stand out from the crowd.

Robert became a self-advocate almost 10 years ago through his local self-advocacy group, Tall Timbers, in Middletown. He is now in his second term as a Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, Inc. (SANYS) board member and one day hopes to be on the national board of Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE), as well as work internationally as a self-advocate.

Robert was first inspired to become a self-advocate to defend against Medicaid cuts from the federal government. The support he gets

from friends and family has empowered him to continue to speak up for himself and others. He also credits his direct service provider, Kevin Morgan, as the "best DSP I have in the world" and called him a mentor who has helped him reach his goals.

As a self-advocate, Robert brings back information from the SANYS state board meetings and shares the news with self-advocates in the lower Hudson Valley region. He does considerable volunteer work on committees for both OPWDD and nonprofit agencies in Orange County, as well as reading to children at a preschool in Middletown.



*Robert Terry, left, and his friend and mentor Kevin Morgan enjoy an evening at Yankee Stadium.*

When not working to better the lives of others, Robert enjoys going on vacation, spending time with his friends and family, and playing video games. We look forward to seeing all that he will achieve in the future! ■

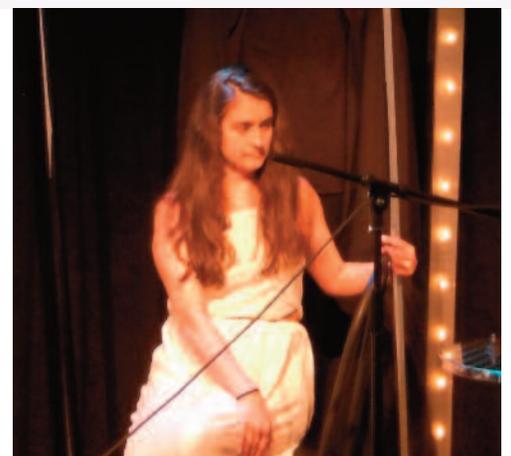
## Variety – The Spice of Life



Where can you go these days to see singers, a pianist, dancers, a guitarist, a Ska band, magicians and an impressionist on the same evening?

If you answered the Variety and Talent Show in Buffalo, you'd be spot on, thanks to efforts of the Center for Self-Advocacy and the disAbility History Museum who put together an evening to be remembered. Held on June 4 in partnership with the MusicalFare Theater of Daemen College, the Variety Show featured performers with and without disabilities.

BJ Stasio fondly remembers the variety shows once held on the campus of the former West Seneca Developmental Center and asked his friends and coworkers if they would be interested in organizing the first inclusive show in the area. There was immediate interest by both attendees and performers who received the coveted golden letter, ala American Idol, acknowledging their talent. ■



# Museum of disABILITY History Offers Insight Into Services for People with Disabilities

For many years, people with disabilities were viewed with curiosity, fear, disdain or pity. Over time, supports for people with disabilities evolved and have led to greater independence and opportunities. Have you ever wondered how that evolution took place?



The Museum of disABILITY History in Buffalo offers great insight into the evolution of services for people with disabilities, how society perceptions have changed, and how opportunities have grown.

The Museum of disABILITY History was established in 1998 by Dr. James M. Boles, president and CEO of People Inc, a non-profit agency in Western New York. The museum is dedicated to advancing the understanding, acceptance and independence of people with disabilities.

## Among its vast collections are:

- Permanent exhibits including a historical introduction, the evolution of care and development of early poorhouses, almshouses and schools, the path to institutions including early State Schools, eugenics, pop culture, sports and disability, the evolution of adaptive equipment and the



Invacar (a three-wheeled carriage powered by a motorcycle-type engine that is accessible.)

- Temporary exhibits including The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From A State Hospital Attic and Continuum of Care: A History of WNY Human Service Agencies.
- Traveling exhibits including African-Americans and the Disability Experience: From Colonial Times, Desegregation, Advocacy and Achievement; The Quest for the Cure: Polio in America; Self-Advocacy: A History of People Speaking Up for Themselves; The Kennedy Connection, Moving Forward, Looking Back; In the Game: Sports and Disability; Madness in America: A History of Mental Health; Reel Life: disABILITY Goes to the Movies; Dr. P.H.Skinner: Local Disability Educator, Advocate and Abolitionist; War and Disability; Little Differences: The Portrayal of Children with disABILITIES Throughout History; and In Celebration of Down Syndrome.

Housed in several rooms in a building at 3826 Main St., Buffalo, the Museum contains artifacts,

photographs and information that tells the story of the lives, triumphs, and struggles of people with disabilities. Several years ago, OPWDD’s traveling exhibit Remembering Willowbrook, was featured at the museum.

Hours of operation are Tuesday-Friday 10:00 am – 4:00 pm, and Saturday 10:00am-2:00pm. There is a nominal admission fee, and guided tours are available by calling (716) 629-3626.

For more information, visit the Museum’s website at <http://museumofdisability.org/>

The Museum of disABILITY History is dedicated to advancing the understanding, acceptance and independence of people with disabilities. The Museum’s exhibits, collections, archives and educational programs create awareness and a platform for dialogue and discovery. Be sure to check it out. ■



# Pete Rivera: A Man About Town

Pete Rivera leads a very busy life. The 23-year-old can be described as “a man about town” who enjoys getting out of the house, being more involved in his community and participating in outdoor activities.

Pete attends a day habilitation program operated by Quality Services for the Autism Community (QSAC) in Long Island three days a week. On the other days, he spends his time volunteering at an animal rescue shelter, going to the movies, bowling, going to the park and taking part in other outdoor sports. He also participates in a basketball league on Friday evenings. Pete now decides what he would like to do on a particular day in consult with one of his community habilitation workers. He’s become more verbal about his desire to spend more time with his friends and will request assistance in setting-up a get together.

While not completely comfortable in crowds, Pete’s still very social and enjoys being out with friends and family, as well as his self-direction staff. Knowing that an adult he trusts is close enough to interject if necessary is all he needs to be willing to participate in an outing.

At home, Pete’s staff has helped him learn how to wash his own clothes and towels; and he is now responsible for cleaning his room, picking out his groceries and feeding his cat. His trips out to the grocery store and to do errands in the community have given him the opportunity to socialize and have improved his social skills. It’s been a very positive improvement in his life, which he credits to self-direction.

Pete has shown growth in areas of communication, increased independence and social interaction and attributes the supports he receives with helping him achieve a richer, fuller life. ■



## Join the Conversation!

There are many new things on the horizon, and OPWDD wants the individuals and families we support to be the first to know!

Sharing news that is important to all our stakeholders quickly and directly is a top priority.

That’s why we’re inviting individuals and families to Join the Conversation by signing up for our online community. We will send you periodic emails about things you should know. And like any good conversation, we want to hear

from you, so please give us your input and feedback. All contact information will be kept confidential. Staff can also sign up to Join the Conversation.

To Join the Conversation visit <https://opwdd.ny.gov/jointheconversation> ■