

# News



A newsletter for the friends of FECA • Foundation for Educating Children with Autism • Winter 2005

## FECA Patrons Dazzled By Success of "Texas Hold 'Em" Fundraiser

The eleventh annual FECA fundraising dinner was bursting at the seams at the Rye Town Hilton Ballroom on November 19th as over 475 parents, family and friends gathered in festive attire to dine, dance, gamble and celebrate.

This year's theme of a "Texas Hold 'Em" Poker Tournament and Casino brought out everyone's creative and fun-loving sides as patrons two-stepped across the dance floor in cowboy boots and doubled down their blackjack bids in their Stetsons meeting the unique challenge of marrying country western attire with black tie regalia.

The Texas Hold 'Em poker tournament was a spectacular success with 35 gamblers competing in an elimination game that resulted in long-time supporter Mike Keech winning a stake of \$35,000 which "bought" him first prize of an authentic slot machine, an overnight stay for two at the Rye Town Hilton and a gift certificate to Ruby's Oyster Bar. The annual silent auction displayed over 80 items ranging from ski trips in Vermont, New York and Utah to a weekend in St. Croix to sexy lingerie and a dazzling array of sporting event tickets and memorabilia. Melanie Schaffran and Peggy Wedin co-chaired the silent auction again this year and were ably assisted by committee members Liz Finder, Susan Murray and Barbara Kimmel with new mom and

HRG staff member, Molly McAllister. Together, they pulled long hours to make this the best and most successful auction yet: \$50,000 on the silent auction alone.



(L to R) Phil and Elise Orlando, Lifetime Achievement Honorees, celebrate with Lone Star Gala Co-Chairs Ann DiChiara and Ruthann Brazil.



Corporate Honoree Guy Colaneri (R), General Manager of Mount Kisco Honda, and wife Carol (left).



Honoree Susan Varsames Young (l) with Phil Orlando.

The dinner program, coordinated again this year by the ever-talented Kathy Jardine, was dedicated to two FECA board members who personify dedication and commitment: Elise and Phil Orlando. In a moment of rare speechlessness, our always-articulate Master of Ceremonies, Phil, had to hand the microphone over to Ann DiChiara, to receive the appreciation and kudos from the crowd.

This year also brought two most deserved and worthy honorees to the podium. Guy Colaneri, general manager of Mt. Kisco Honda, has provided vocational opportunities to DMLC students and also assisted in launching our "Drive Our Kids to Work" campaign. The campaign resulted in the purchase of a Honda Odyssey Minivan, currently being used to transport students to their vocational programs. Susan Varsames Young, a long-time supporter and pioneer in the autism community, received a long-overdue standing ovation for her dedication to the autism community. Susan is founder and director of the Holistic Learning Center, which seeks strategies for educational and nutritional growth, and

## FECA and Mount Sinai Seaver Center "Step Into The Future" Together

The thirteenth annual FECA "Stepping into the Future" Conference, co-sponsored again this year by the Mt. Sinai Seaver Center, was held on November 13th and 14th bringing together scholars and researchers to probe "new insights into the diagnosis, neurobiology, genetics, education and treatment of autism."

Acting New Jersey Governor, Richard J. Codey, welcomed participants to the Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York to open the medical and scientific research day of the program. A strong advocate in the fields of mental health and developmental disabilities, Codey stressed that these issues require the support and commitment of government. Eric Hollander, M.D., Founder and Director of the Seaver Center provided his annual "state of the field" presentation which gave the autism community an overview of the status of research into the causes and treatment of autism.



Acting New Jersey Governor, Richard J. Codey

Dr. Joe Piven, director of the Neurodevelopmental Disorders Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discussed his research which focuses on the pathogenesis of autism-related disorders, studies on molecular genetics, the neuropsychological basis of autism and the broad autism phenotype and magnetic resonance imaging of early brain development. Dr. Jeremy Silverman, Director of the Family Studies Program at Mt. Sinai led a discussion on behavioral traits associated with a particular gene related to



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## FECA and Mount Sinai Seaver Center "Step Into The Future" Together

autism. Other afternoon sessions included a seminar on submicroscopic chromosomal abnormalities in autism led by Dr. L. Alison McInnes of the Laboratory of Neurobehavioral Disorders and fMRI studies in autism led by Dr. Evodkia Anagnostou of the Department of Psychiatry and Seaver Center both of Mt. Sinai.

Participants had a choice of five afternoon workshops discussing trends in psychopharmacology, social skills instruction, further genetic studies, a discussion of Asperger's Syndrome and a workshop highlighting support and advocacy groups.

Participants then traveled to White Plains, New York for the second day of the conference, which focused on educational strategies ranging from toddler age to the working world of adults. Jay Wedin, newly elected President of FECA introduced Dr. Ruth C. Sullivan, Founder of the Autism Society of America and Director and Founder of the Autism Services Center in Huntington, West Virginia.

Dr. Sullivan began her keynote address by stating that first and foremost she is the mother of a son with autism. Like the founders of FECA, this is what brought her to her life-long commitment to the autism community. Dr. Sullivan presented the ASA's position paper on the "National Crisis in Adult Services for Individuals with Autism" which provides a comprehensive overview of the tremendous void in services for the adults with autism resulting in the daily hardship for tens of thousands of families in the U.S. Dr. Sullivan spoke movingly of the origins of the Autism Services Center and the critical ingredients, which have sustained it as a model for programs providing vocational and residential support.

Based on "Principles for Service Provision", Dr. Sullivan stated that all clients must be treated with dignity and respect, providing them with access to the most normal and least restrictive social and physical environments. Opportunities to pursue meaningful employment, including accessing of job coaches, is critical with all caretakers, including providers, advocates and family members being held accountable for their



2005 Stepping into the Future Conference Co-Chairs (l to r) Ann DiChiara and Theresa Pirraglia with Eric Hollander, M.D., professor of psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, director of the Seaver Center and N.Y. Autism Center of Excellence.

role in the lives of adults with autism through appropriate training and education. Dr. Sullivan stated that the dearth of appropriate programs is reaching crisis proportions as the numbers of children with autism age out of governmentally supported educational programs. She stated that that number, using a formula of 1 in 500, (most researchers now state that the figure is 1 in 166) would mean that there are currently over 540,000 adults with autism, many without access to appropriate programs. Dr. Sullivan called on participants to urge their members of Congress to support The Combating Autism Act 2005.

Conference participants had the choice of four workshops for the remainder of the morning which ranged from "Utilizing ABA Strategies for Toddlers with Autism," presented by Anne S. Holmes of the New Jersey-based EDEN Family of Services, "Teaching Language with Picture-

Enhanced Visual Techniques to Minimally Verbal Children," presented by Rose Kraft, "Teaching Work and Life Skills to Adults with Autism" presented by Dr. Gregory S. MacDuff of the Princeton Child Development Institute and a panel presentation of the state of the psychopharmacology field presented by Dr. Alice Jo Siegel, a private practitioner and Dr. Evodkia Anagnostou of the Seaver Center.

A luncheon and break enabled participants to shop amongst the various vendors providing educational and recreational materials. The afternoon sessions provided a wide choice of workshops ranging from an inclusion workshop presented by Cathy Pratt, to an overview of "PROMPT" for parents by speech pathologist Cheryl Small Jackson. It also included "a learning as adults with autism program" provided by Anne Holmes, and an informal "Ask the Expert" session, offered by Dr. Richard Foxx.

Later in the afternoon, panelists provided sessions on the latest research in speech and language pathology for high functioning children with autism by Dr. Diane Twachtman-Cullen of the ADDCON Center, a cautionary presentation presented by Dr. Foxx to promote "savvy consumerism" of services for children with autism and a presentation by Catherine McHugh, Director of Training with the NYS Commission on Quality of Care & Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities. McHugh announced the creation of a disabilities awareness newsletter to enable kids with autism to "speak out." Staff members from DMLC also presented a workshop which is detailed in a related article.

## In The Spirit of Giving...

As holiday time approaches, our recent honoree and newest member of our board of advisors, Susan Varsames Young, brings holiday cheer to the children of DMLC with her generous donation to the newly renovated toy and game library.

Staff from Programs for Little Learners donated their holiday gift money to FECA. The Bank of New York designated FECA as the "charity of the month" and encouraged employees to donate money in exchange for wearing denim that day. And, Price Waterhouse Coopers designated FECA as one of its year-end charities.

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most recently coordinated relief efforts in Mississippi, which served the needs of children with autism and their families displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

The event, which was co-chaired again this year by former FECA President Ann DiChiara and the ever-brilliant and loyal Ruthann Brazill, also brought out three DMLC students - Pratik Ravichandran, Matt Pirraglia and Brett Schaffran to represent their classmates at the gala.

Following on the heels ("cowboy" heels,

of course!) of last year's successful pledge drive to raise money for the school's music program, a similar drive raised over \$13,000 to refurbish the kitchen at the school where students learn self-help and vocational skills and make and eat their lunches.

Universally acknowledged to be "the most fun event" yet, this year's cowboy themed event raised a spectacular \$200,000 ("Yee Haw!") which will go directly to supporting staff and programs at DMLC.

# Communication with Non-verbal Autistic Children using Augmentative or Alternative Systems (AAC)

Cindy Alterson, Ph.D., BCBA and Jennifer Naughton Basch, M.S., CCC-SLP

In this workshop, the presenters reviewed the research in the psychological and speech and language literature in an attempt to answer the questions: (1) Which form of AAC works best with children with autism, sign language or picture-exchange systems? (2) Will AAC help or impede the development of verbal speech? (3) How do I set up an appropriate communicative environment for AAC users?

Both sign language and picture-exchange systems have been shown to be effective forms of communication for people with autism. Both systems have been studied in terms of increasing manding and tacting repertoires in people with autism. They have not been studied in research for more advanced communication skills, although clinically they are certainly used as such. There is virtually no research looking at the factors which may predict which system may be better for any individual person with autism.

Overall, research shows that the use of

AAC in a total communication package (i.e. using the AAC with verbal speech approximations) results in greater verbal speech development than either AAC or speech alone. However, general results do not allow us to predict for an individual child whether or not the AAC will ultimately be augmentative or alternative. Those who had developed speech following AAC use tended to have verbal imitation skills to begin with and did not develop speech after an extensive (up to 100-200 words) AAC vocabulary was used functionally.

When setting up an environment to implement AAC use, it is most important to make sure all communication partners are adequately trained. AAC is only effective if those

who are expected to respond to it know how to do so. It is also important to select appropriate vocabulary, and there are various methods by which to do this (i.e. rating scales, observation, etc.). The team that is in place to teach and use AAC must all meet together to develop vocabulary and functional situations for the person with autism to practice their AAC skills.



2005 Stepping into the Future Conference participants received an analysis of research regarding the education of non-verbal children with autism.

# FECA's Grant-Seeking Program Adds Prestigious MasterCard International Award

FECA was among a select group of Westchester non-profit organizations to take part in a grant recipient awards ceremony at MasterCard International's corporate headquarters in Purchase, New York on

November 15, 2005. Each year, MasterCard International supports organizations like FECA whose mission is to provide exceptional educational programs for children. The awards are targeted to supporting youth, with focus on programs that use of technology and education. FECA is proud to have been selected as a \$10,000 recipient of MasterCard's Youth Education & Technology Fund.



MasterCard International representatives Adam Gluck, Vice President, Advanced Payments Solutions, and Jean Altz, Vice President, Corporate and Executive Communications, present the MasterCard "Youth Education & Technology Award" to FECA representatives Lisa Keogh, Grant Coordinator and Melanie Schaffran, Founder and Board Member.

"MasterCard's decision to invest in FECA's educational curriculum at Devereux Millwood Learning Center has been instrumental in allowing FECA to complete the purchase of ten new computers and software for the students and staff at DMLC," states Jay Wedin, FECA Board President. "We have wanted to make this investment for several years, and funding from MasterCard International, Senator Suzi Oppenheimer, Assemblyman Adam Bradley, the Junior League of Northern Westchester, Time Warner and several other funders have made a new computer system possible for the school."

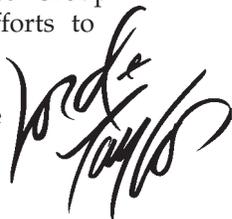
MasterCard International selected National Philanthropy Day to bestow the awards. "As a global corporation, MasterCard is committed to promoting education to help strengthen communities," commented Jean Altz, Vice President, Corporate and Executive Communications, at MasterCard. "We are proud to support the efforts of agencies like FECA who do so much to help local youth develop the skills necessary to succeed in a diverse and global workforce." DMLC students and staff think the new computer system is, in a word, "Priceless."



Clockwise, from bottom DMLC students Mark Brailey and Owen Murray pose with FECA Board Member Susan Murray in a newly acquired Honda Odyssey Minivan. The van transports students to vocational training programs at community businesses. Funding for this vehicle was raised at FECA's Spring Reception and supplemented by grants from the Autism Coalition for Research and Education (ACRE), now known as Autism Speaks, and Mount Kisco Honda, a vocational program training site.

# Lord & Taylor Benefit Bash Charity Event

On November 9TH, FECA, along with 100 other non-profit groups in Westchester County, took part in "Charity Day" at Lord & Taylor, Eastchester. Store executives and associates strive to make a difference within their communities through a Benefit Bash – a special day of storewide shopping, events and discounts benefiting many local charities. FECA board member Gina DeCaprio and Lisa Keogh of Hospitality Resource Group spearheaded the efforts to heighten awareness of autism in the community in the day-long event which raised \$2,000 for FECA.



# DMLC Welcomes New Staff

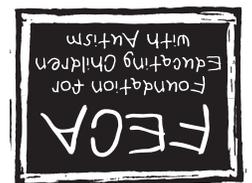
DMLC has experienced a seismic shift in staffing recently and has welcomed a number of new staff members. The new staff includes the following behavior specialists: Melissa Bakter, Roti Villa, Maria Falco, Maly Thai, Jessica Smith, Curtis Festa, Randi Johnson, Rose Cybilski-Daley, Rarsha Terry, Parker Ormerod, Susan Mathews, Joanna Truslow, Ronni Bacon, Yvonne Bansil and Willy Tanui.

Jennifer Hartnett, who had been a classroom teacher for the past 2 years, was promoted to Education and Training Coordinator. A new position was created to develop and expand vocational programs for students and Neil Boyle has been brought in to DMLC to serve as coordinator. Maria Pinero was hired to handle administrative matters at the school and Sarah Perry was engaged this summer to serve as receptionist.

# Party-goers enjoy "Texas Hold 'Em" theme!



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