

A young boy with short brown hair is looking towards the camera. He is wearing a blue and white face mask that features a baseball design. To his left is a large, detailed sculpture of a horse's head, which is grey and textured. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

SPECIAL STRIDES
STORIES



MISSION STATEMENT



Special Strides is a non-profit organization devoted to improving the lives of **INDIVIDUALS**



With a unique combination of therapy, horses, and the natural environment, individuals **ACHIEVE** goals appropriate for therapy, recreation, and education.



Special Strides provides all individuals an **OPPORTUNITY** to "Improve their lives... one stride at a time" regardless of financial status.



OUR HISTORY



Founded in 1998, Special Strides is a place where horses, therapy and nature come together. Sam Landy and Congress Hill Farm divinely became the homestead where Laurie Landy began her dream of providing Occupational Therapy with the



partnership of a horse. While employed in the Freehold school system, Laurie would invite the special needs pre-school for a day on her farm. Witnessing children independently walking for the first time or uttering their first word convinced her to begin developing the Special Strides program. With the support of her family, friends, community, dedicated therapists, volunteers and, of course, the



horses, Laurie's dream became a reality. Today, Laurie and Co-Executive Director and Physical Therapist, Susie Rehr, can indeed point to the major strides they have made since the inception. Serving 150 individuals, Special Strides fills a role within the special needs community by offering a variety of programs that inspire children and adults to discover their strengths through engagement with horses and other farm activities.



Programs and services include Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Adaptive Riding, and Equine Facilitated Learning. For those who cannot afford the program, Special Strides and its supporters are committed to making it possible for them to participate through a financial assistance program called the Steven Werthan Memorial Fund.



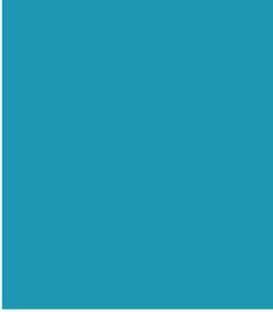
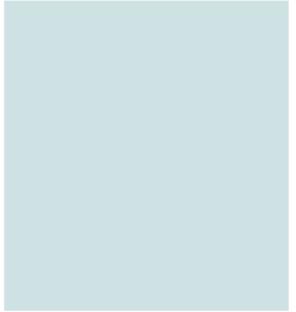
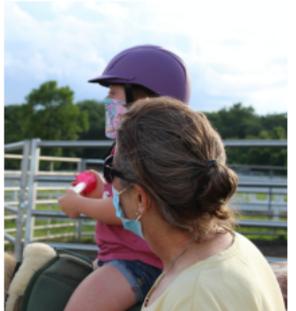
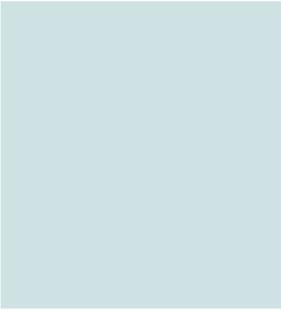
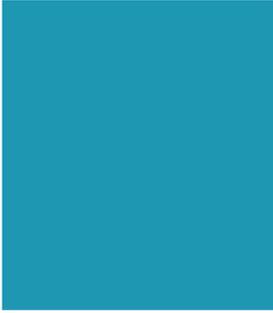
DEAR COMMUNITY,

Special Strides is deeply meaningful to both of us. We practice the art of our profession in a manner that allows individuals to find and bring out their "best selves." The movement of the horse and wonder of the farm has always ignited a spirit within us and all of the individuals we have met on our journey. We are proud of and grateful for our team of dedicated professionals, devoted volunteers and herd of equines!

Through respect, possibility, positivity, empathy, knowledge, and teamwork, we improve lives...one stride at a time.

Thank you for joining us on our incredible journey.

With Gratitude,
Laurie & Susie





TRENT'S story

Trent is a five year old boy living with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a progressive muscle wasting disease. The typical progression of Trent's illness leads to the use of a wheelchair by age 12 and a life expectancy of mid to late 20's. In comparison with typical children his age, he has gross motor weakness, difficulty climbing stairs, walking long distances and jumping, and lifting heavy objects. Thanks to early diagnosis and intervention, Trent continues to thrive, despite these limitations.



Johnny, one of the herd of therapy horses at Special Strides, has been Trent's buddy since he was 17 months old. Kim, Trent's mom, described Special Strides as "so much more than therapy" for her son. She called it a "magical place" where he is accepted and thrives. "He walks around the farm like he owns it," she recalled with a smile. Kim remarked that "when you have a child who has physical limitations, having a place like Special Strides, where he can get on a horse and it doesn't matter how fast or how slow he is, or how high he can jump...he's on the horse and the horse is able to be his legs...he feels that power and his is uplifted." Kim couldn't have stated it more clearly when she said, "As a parent...I feel like the horse gives him wings."

Trent & Susie | 2017



Trent & Susie | 2020

Trent's dad also described how Susie, their therapist at Special Strides, often goes above and beyond for their family. Whether it be researching a question or following up with other professionals to learn more about Trent, he feels lucky to have access to this unique program. These parents described feeling that the staff would do "anything within their power" to help them. Kim shared the feeling of knowing that although each family who comes to Special Strides is unique, they all walk away getting exactly what they need: "a sense of hope."



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UCY'S story



Lucy is a vibrant, amazing fourteen year old. While she does have Cerebral Palsy, CP does not stop or define her.

She is the youngest of six children and most often is the one telling everyone what to do. Her smile, heart and enthusiasm are bigger than anyone. Lucy began having therapy when she was six months old, first with early intervention and then outpatient at Children's Specialized Hospital in Hamilton. It was a therapist

at Children's Specialized that suggested her family check out Special Strides. Her parents, Beth and Don, were looking for activities that would be fun for Lucy. They weren't sure how riding a horse could be therapeutic, but they knew it would be fun.

They met with Susie Rehr for Lucy's evaluation. Beth shared, "We walked out knowing Lucy had come to the right place and that Susie was so knowledgeable and spot on in all of her assessments. She also was encouraging and optimistic about what hippotherapy could do for Lucy. We couldn't wait to become part of the Special Strides family!" It was at that point that Lucy began and so did the fun. She couldn't wait to go horseback riding every week. She loved riding the horses, walking the



paths in the woods, and playing the games with the therapists. Little did she know she was getting therapy. Lucy made progress in stretching many of her tight muscles and in posture. But what was most remarkable was to see the growth in confidence in herself and her abilities. She loved to tell people, who may have only seen a little girl with Cerebral Palsy, that she rode horses. Beth still feels that Special Strides is the perfect name for the program. She remarked, " It is appropriately named as it is such a special place! We will never forget our experience there or those of other clients that we grew to know. It amazes me to this day how riding a horse can make such a difference for a child who experiences challenges. I know that the horses are talented but the therapists alongside them are incredibly talented and devoted. They make lives better every day, one ride at a time. It is for these reasons that we will continue to support their efforts in reaching as many children that they can and creating miracles for so many families."

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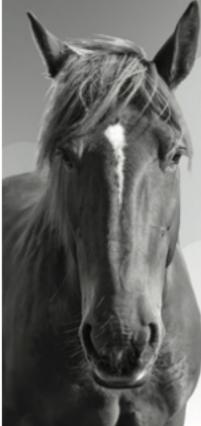
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Megan Drew Gostkowski

A big thanks to Laurie, Susie and all of the handlers for all of their time and dedication in helping children like Megan shine brightly for the whole world to see.

Love, The Gostkowski Family



CONGRATS SPECIAL STRIDES!



ALLISON & DAVID NAGELBERG



ICO'S story



At the early age of two, Nico's family read a parents' magazine and began thinking of their own son with developmental challenges. In that magazine they discovered a beautiful and inspiring story about Special Strides. At that very moment, the story of a 20 year relationship was launched. Prompted by the article, Nico's mom inquired and was thrilled to learn that Special Strides offered programming beginning at two years of age!



Today Nico's challenges include his ability to focus, social interaction, communication, understanding social cues and navigating a social environment. The farm is a safe haven where he "doesn't worry about not understanding sarcasm." Nico has his own way of communicating, but this presents no obstacle whatsoever. The staff at Special Strides "gets him."





Thanks to the precautions and preparations that Special Strides instituted during the passing days of Covid, Nico was able to receive services at the farm in a safe space. His parents were thrilled that he would continue to “grow as a young adult” and they did not worry about his exposure at the farm. He became the original participant in the launch of the Special Strides Pre-vocational Program. Nico adopted the title “Grounds Crew”.

His family described Special Strides to the community as a “place like no other in the world.” They shared that it is an “exceptional place where the staff cares about your whole being. Special Strides is not just focused on the client’s abilities but the FAMILY. They improve the quality of life.”



Today Nico loves people, sports and of course, horses. Most importantly he enjoys having a sense of accomplishment, being needed, and having a purpose.



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RYAN'S story

Twenty years ago, Ryan Sahlin became one of the first children to be transformed by the magic of Special Strides. Today he is a 24 year old graduate of Rutgers with a Bachelor's degree in Sports Journalism and a Master's degree in Global Sports Business. He balanced the demands of being a student with a part time job, physical conditioning through CrossFit, and pick up games of basketball and hockey. When not playing sports, he is writing about them on his blog GreaterThanTheGame.net, a site dedicated to inspiring stories in sports.



Recalling his first experiences at Special Strides, he remembers his “walks through the woods, being able to catch frogs and doing physical therapy that just felt like having fun.” Ryan says his earliest memory “has to be being three or four and brushing my favorite horse Patches in the barn right by the track.” The farm is where he recalls he “learned my right from left” and “its where I made lasting relationships that I still have today.”

Special Strides means “family” to Ryan. “It was a place that was able to give me a great starting point both physically, through therapy, and socially, interacting with the volunteers.” “Through the program,” Ryan tells us, “I learned what a gait should feel like through the movement of the horse. It improved my balance and stability and my core strength in a way that no other therapy could have. Laurie and everyone at the farm helped me achieve one of my life goals of becoming an Eagle Scout. It had such a positive impact on me that I wanted to return to do my Eagle Scout project there because the farm had given so much to me.”



“Special Strides builds a foundation for kids with special needs to succeed in the future. It is a place where clients can get stronger and have fun in the process.”



THANK YOU SPECIAL STRIDES
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amazing work of the
Special Strides team!**

**Delene, Joe,
Eliana & Luke**



JULIA'S story

Julia is a three year old toddler with a remarkable story. Born with Myotonic Dystrophy Type 1; a rare genetic disease that comes with the serious diagnosis of poor muscle strength which compromises one's ability to breathe. Julia spent her first two years of life on a ventilator in a long term care facility because of the inability of her family to attend to her medical needs.



Upon discharge, she was not yet able to sit up nor play with toys. Her doctor then recommended she pursue "hippotherapy" which includes purposeful manipulation of equine movement. The family sought out Special Strides.



Following her very first treatment, Julia began to sit up without the need to use her hands for balance. She started self feeding, much to the amazement of her parents. Her mom is convinced that, "Special Strides is like a miracle." She added, "I don't have words; they are giving her a chance for a life."

For the past three months, Julia has continued to receive weekly physical therapy and occupational therapy. Her parents share that she is now able to use the muscles in her face to smile, laugh and even scream! She is beginning to speak and is now able to answer her parents with the word "yes." Julia is walking with support and reaching out to hug her Mom. At home, she is in constant motion and now able to play with her two older siblings. We look forward to celebrating Julia's continuing progress towards meeting and exceeding her goals. Her mom is convinced that Special Strides has provided her daughter with a future. We agree!



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Special Strides and
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Laurie and Sam
Landy for all you do!**

Love, Lisa Kaplan and
Andrew Kaye

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A collage of four photographs showing acrylic sneeze guards installed in different environments: a waiting area with chairs, a reception desk, a service counter, and a vehicle service area. The collage includes text overlays such as "Custom sizes and designs available" and "Personal signs also available". At the bottom right of the collage is the logo for W&E BAUM, including their address, phone number, email, and website.

Congratulations Special Strides!
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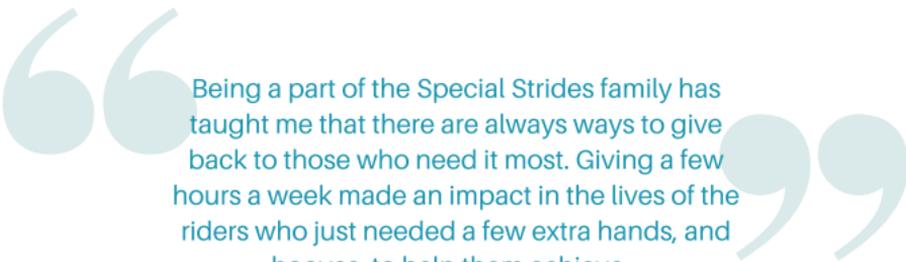
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Matthew Earl is a 24 year old graduate of Ramapo College of New Jersey with a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting and a minor in International Business. He is currently a Senior Associate with KPMG in New York, advising clients as part of their Deal Advisory - Accounting Advisory Services team. He recently became a licensed CPA in New York. Thinking back on his experience as a volunteer, Matt told us, "Special Strides is a place where truly magical things happen every day. I saw firsthand the miraculous transformations in the attitudes and confidence of the riders as they improved their strength and gained new abilities from the instructional riding sessions, even after one visit."

His earliest memory of Special Strides was his first session as a sidewalker. "It was an evening session, and I was trying my hardest to not seem nervous. Sidewalking entails a lot of responsibility, yet I felt at ease when I was introduced to the lead instructor guiding the lesson."

Matt recalled that it was a "privilege to work closely with so many passionate and talented volunteers and instructors" as a volunteer at Special Strides. His leadership as president of the National Honor Society at Monroe Township High School led to the adoption of Special Strides as their charity of choice for that year, thus raising a significant amount of money for the organization." It was tremendously fulfilling to be able to give back to a group that taught me many lessons in patience, resilience, and optimism," Matt shared. "My work with Special Strides and the NHS actually became the foundation for my career after high school, and eventually led me to my current job. My experience at Special Strides positively changed my life in more ways than I can ever imagine."



Being a part of the Special Strides family has taught me that there are always ways to give back to those who need it most. Giving a few hours a week made an impact in the lives of the riders who just needed a few extra hands, and hooves, to help them achieve...

Based on his own transformative experience, Matt believes the most important thing the public should know about Special Strides is that "the instructional ponies and horses require a great deal of attention and care. These animals are extraordinarily intelligent and patient, and they themselves have to undergo a great deal of training before they can act as vehicles for the miracles that take place every day at Special Strides. There are so many ways to leave a positive legacy at Special Strides, and it always has a direct impact on the lives of the riders, their families, and our furry friends that make this all possible." Clearly Matt continues to live these lessons everyday.

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MEREDITH'S STORY



Growing up, Meredith Gebel always knew she wanted to be a physical therapist because Caroline, her youngest sister, has a progressive neurodegenerative disease. She is wheelchair bound and unable to speak like

many of the clients Meredith has helped at Special Strides. Over the years, she watched Caroline work with countless therapists and was always in awe of their patience, creative drive, and most importantly empathy. Today Meredith herself has her doctorate in Physical Therapy.

She first came to Special Strides eight years ago as a physical therapy student on her final clinical rotation. Susie and Laurie embraced her like family and laid the foundation for her educational journey at Special Strides. As someone who did not have much experience with horses it was overwhelming at first. But she soon realized, "they have such gentle demeanor and I am amazed by the incredible intuition they have working with the special needs population." Meredith feels so strongly that, "the staff here at Special Strides has taught me so much about the horses and their therapeutic abilities that I often joke I wouldn't know how to treat if I didn't have a horse with me. We all have great coworkers, mine just happen to have four legs and a tail."

Meredith realizes that the “COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on everyone: emotionally, financially, physically, and mentally. Our client population has particularly been hit hardest due to their vulnerability and inability to receive many of the services they so desperately rely on.” She wants to remind us all that “it is more important now, more than ever, that we make these services available again. Special Strides has been taking extra precautions since our reopening to be able to provide therapy services to our clients in a safe manner. We have developed a “new normal” in order to cater to every client’s needs but with this comes added financial burdens which is why Fund-a-Child is such a vital key to our ability to continue operating. We promise to keep delivering smiles, even if they may be covered under masks.”



“I may be a physical therapist but first and foremost I am the older sister of a child with special needs,” Meredith continued. “Growing up, I was able to participate in sports, dance, cheer and other recreational activities that my sister was not. It brings me great joy to work in a setting where we provide therapeutic services but also a place where everyone is ABLE. From bouncing on a trampoline, to swinging on a swing set, and of course, feeling the therapeutic movement of the horse, there are no boundaries regardless of your disability. HERE, everything is possible.” It is because of the important work of professionals like Meredith that Special Strides is able to continue our mission.



The success of Special Strides is a tribute to the Board of Directors who has guided us with governance, wisdom and compassion! Thank you to our special community leaders:



Gary Fox
Patricia Gallagher
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Celia Mastbaum
Allison Nagelberg
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We thank the Twilight Committee - together we are stronger!

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"Special Strides is a beacon that shines the light of hope across the community"
-Father of child with autism

"Everyone leaves Special Strides feeling happier, more positive and more empowered than when they arrived."
- Monica, a staff member

"It is an extraordinary place that improves the lives of everyone it touches."
-Joann, a donor, after a tour

"I found a place that does such good for my soul."
-Anna, an adult volunteer

QUOTES

"I can do this!"
-Jake, a five year old boy with autism and anxiety

"The life-changing work you do makes my heart sing"
-Anonymous

"I have learned so much and it has definitely confirmed my passion!"
-Megan, an Occupational Therapy Intern

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