



FOCUS Matters

FALL 2022



Fresh Start Year Six

Our sixth school year has begun at the Fresh Start School! We are able to begin this year with seventeen students from all across Connecticut.

The Fresh Start School is a special program, a true gem. Our kids are those who have struggled in their traditional school settings and who need that extra clinical support in order to begin their journey of learning. At Fresh Start clinicians are available to students every day, in the program. This level of support really makes a difference, and can be seen in the evolving growth and maturity of our students.



The new classroom space named Annex II

This year we have added another new physical space, now making for three different and unique classrooms. The newest space is dubbed Annex II and is our Middle School classroom. Annex I is now our High School classroom and Dowd Ave, will be used for our Transition Program.

These three spaces comprise the community of the Fresh Start School. The importance of community cannot be underestimated when working with students with autism. At Fresh Start our kids learn to make friends and everyone is accepted as a member of the FOCUS community. Social learning becomes a part of their daily educational experience.



Eating the pizza they made after working at American Flatbread

Many thanks to all the incredible staff who make Fresh Start School possible, and best of luck to our students for a great school year.

Fresh Start School Wish List

- STEM kits
- LEGO sets
- Sensory items
- Funds to help remodel the Fresh Start School's staff bathroom that is in desperate need of updating

Shop our wishlist or donate!



SCAN ME



Enjoying the new sensory platform swings



Support From the Community

FOCUS is grateful to have received grants recently that will fund new technology, supplies, and support for our Fresh Start School and Adult Support Service programs. Thanks to Union Savings Bank, UNICO National, and Town Fair Tire Foundation for believing in our mission and helping us to better serve the Connecticut autism community!



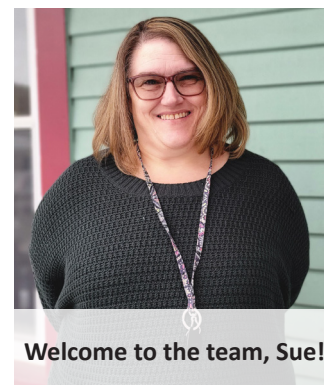
UNICO National supporting technology needs for Adult Support Services



Union Savings Bank Foundation supporting technology needs for the Fresh Start School

Getting to Know our Staff: Sue Petrok

Fresh Start School welcomes our newest special education teacher, Sue Petrok! Sue’s journey led her to FOCUS as a mother to a son with autism. As a parent navigating her son’s autism and advocating for his needs in a public school system inspired her to complete her bachelor’s degree in psychology from Charter Oak State College and earn a Master’s degree in elementary education and special education from the University of Bridgeport. During her educational journey, Sue was a paraprofessional at Watertown public schools for nine years before becoming a teacher for seven years. Sue has always been drawn to FOCUS because her son participated in programming in his adolescence, and through her experience in education, she found that students with autism are her favorite population to work with.



Welcome to the team, Sue!

As a special education teacher at Fresh Start School, Sue has hit the sweet spot working with our students and being a part of a staff that offers a supportive and collaborative environment with fluid communication.

Sue is pursuing her Ph.D. in administration and educational leadership from the University of Bridgeport. She has goals to help Fresh Start School continue to improve curriculum structure and transition programming.

Students know Ms. Sue loves llamas (which can be found throughout her classroom) and loves them for a good reason. Llamas are determined and persevere – which is what she wants her students to be like. Ms. Sue is creative and enjoys painting, singing, and acting. She has written children’s stories and has developed programming and curriculum for family retreats for JONI and Friends International Disability Ministry in New England.

We are excited and grateful for Ms. Sue to be a part of our talented team of educators!



Stopping to smell the flowers at Tonn’s Marketplace

Supports for Adults

Our newest program designed to meet the needs of adults with autism in our community continues to grow! We recognize that transportation is a barrier that adults with autism face, so we meet with our program participants on Zoom daily. This way, we can meet with a more significant number of adults and create a community to combat the social isolation experienced by many of our participants.

In addition to our online social and recreational activities, we meet in person! We host a walking group that meets at different locations, a Tuesday night game group, Friday Night Social Club, and we host alternating activities on Saturdays and Sundays.

To address vocational skills, we are growing our one-to-one mentoring to help prepare our folks for volunteer and paid positions in the community. We've been working on our social skills throughout the pandemic, and now we're ready to move into the community!



Having a good old time at the CT Renaissance Faire



Going for a ride on the Naugatuck Railroad

Presentation At Rotary

FOCUS Adult Support Services had the pleasure of speaking with Avon-Canton Rotary. FOCUS continues to enjoy a strong relationship with the club, and on this visit, we shared updates on our growing adult support services programming and our current needs.

Many of the adults we work with have fallen off the "Services Cliff" - a phenomenon in the autism community where adults with autism struggle with severe isolation after leaving school due to an extreme lack of support and services.

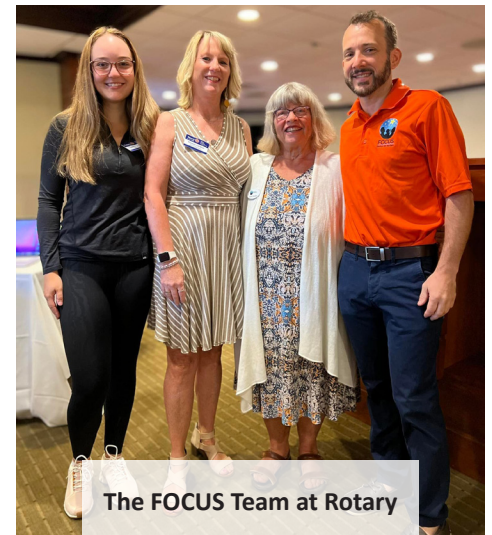
Our Adult Support Services Coordinator Sharon Cable, our Director of the Supportive Housing Program Adam Cohen, and Executive Director Donna Swanson discussed with the club how we are growing our program to bring meaning into the lives of the adults we work with.

Our adults are ready to participate in community volunteer opportunities and jobs like office work, gardening, deliveries, and necessary tasks often overlooked or neglected in homes and businesses.

The discussion brought ideas for volunteer or paid positions in our community and awareness of our participant's needs to combat isolation.

It was great to make new connections and opportunities for our adults to connect more with the community!

If you are interested in supporting this program, volunteer or paid positions can be as small as 1-2 hours a week and do not need ongoing commitment, and FOCUS can match a program participant accompanied by a staff to meet any needs. Call 860-693-6127 for more information!



The FOCUS Team at Rotary

Got Paint!

We are so indebted to our great friend and longtime board member Craig Ellis for again, that's again, volunteering to paint the exterior of our Dowd. Ave. location. Craig is a professional painter whose thriving business "Got Paint" has just completed their second painting of the Fresh Start building. If you get a chance, drive by and take a peek at our beautiful school!

In these tough economic times, it is very unusual to get such a labor-intensive donation. Did I mention he also donated the paint!

Many thanks to a great friend of FOCUS!



Spotlight: Lee Soderberg

Lee Soderberg arrived as a reserved young man at Fresh Start School in the summer of 2018. Over the years, Lee has grown from a student who would quietly observe others to a role model. He is currently enrolled in our transition program that prepares students for life after graduation, where his emerging self-determination shines! At job placements, Lee commits himself to learn new skills and giving it his all, whether he is creating visual displays at Larson's Garden Center, blacksmithing, or in the kitchen at American Flatbread. His growing strengths have earned him paid offers at these placements! In the classroom, our staff collaborates with Lee as a student mentor, using his wisdom and insight to inspire and engage his classmates as they too become more mature and goal-oriented. We are incredibly proud of Lee and his personal growth!



Lee at Fresh Start School



Arranging the pumpkin display at Larson's Garden Center



Class trip to Elizabeth Park

WE ARE HIRING



When you work at FOCUS you work alongside staff dedicated to our mission to allow individuals with autism to reach their full potential!

Join a team that creates a positive environment where staff and those we serve thrive!

Available Positions:

- Therapeutic Group Home (Barkhamsted, CT)
 - Direct Care positions full and part-time shifts available.
- Fresh Start School (Canton, CT)
 - Teacher – Full or part time, Special Education preferred
 - Teaching Assistant - Part time

Email employment@focuscenterforautism.org for more information or to apply.