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## Graduating Senior Brings CPW's Gifted Corner Showcase to Iona University During Abilities Week 2024

NEW ROCHELLE, NY – On Thursday April 25, 2024, Cerebral Palsy of Westchester (CPW)'s Gifted Corner premiered a powerful showcase at Iona University as part of Iona's Abilities Week 2024. Hosted by Senior Annika Ziels, and with the support of the Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, the Gifted Corner's program was presented as part of Ziels' senior thesis. CPW's Ollie Lowery, Claudia Tompkins, Jennifer Feltenstein and Nickolas Wheeler presented singing, cooking, poetry and a live sports podcast to an entranced student audience – demonstrating how much those with intellectual and developmental disabilities have to offer. The group was vocal about their desire to be acknowledged and “seen” as vibrant contributors to society.



Annika Ziels opening the showcase and introducing members of The Gifted Corner. Photo by Honora Banks.

The Gifted Corner was originally conceived by a group of CPW's Self-Advocates as part of *"We the People - Partners in Advocacy: Shifting social perception about disability and the value of difference in our community,"* a program facilitated by Carol Blessing from Cornell University. CPW's team chose to use a showcase-styled platform to educate the community about individuals like themselves who are living with disabilities, and to banish some of the negative conceptions. *"With a little bit of assistance, we can be full members of the community,"* commented the advocates. The Gifted Corner's mission

statement includes *“Shifting perceptions by showing what we can bring to society . . . Let’s Stand Together and Be Better Together!”*



Iona University Senior Annika Ziels has been volunteering with CPW since the fall of 2022. Connecting those living with disabilities and the broader community has been part of her personal mission and has played a part in her studies ever since she participated in her high school’s peer mentor integration program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Ziels initially committed to volunteering at CPW once every other week, but soon began showing up weekly. She organized friendship visits with her Iona peers, bringing in 8-10 volunteers every week to assist in various art and recreational programs at CPW. When CPW volunteer and internship placement manager Joan Colangelo approached Ziels about arranging a showcase for the Gifted Corner, Ziels quickly went to work, realizing that the Gifted Corner’s mission so perfectly matched her own and aligned so well with her senior thesis, which broaches on the subject of representation and inclusion of those with IDD’s in the media and the arts.

Joan Colangelo commented, *“Annika has been a wonderful addition to CPW, helping to bring in different people from the Iona University community, helping them to get to know the individuals here, and connecting our communities.”*

Celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> year in 2024, **Cerebral Palsy of Westchester’s** mission is to advance the independence, productivity, and full citizenship of people living with all developmental disabilities including autism, neurological impairments, intellectual disabilities, epilepsy, and cerebral palsy. CPW’s main campus is located in Rye Brook, NY, housing a special education school, an adult day habilitation program and recreation programs. CPW operates the United Preschool Center in White Plains, as well as seven group homes throughout Westchester. Through a comprehensive network of educational programs, day services, residential sites, therapeutic services, employment training, recreation programs and advocacy, the agency helps thousands of children and adults in Westchester and Fairfield Counties live more productive and satisfying lives. The organization’s motto is: *Realizing Tomorrow’s Potential . . . Today!* For more, visit [cpwestchester.org](http://cpwestchester.org). For more information on the The Gifted Corner, contact Joan Colangelo, Special Projects Director, at [joan.colangelo@cpwestchester.org](mailto:joan.colangelo@cpwestchester.org).



*Gifted Corner participants Claudia Tompkins, Ollie Lowery, Jennifer Feltenstein and Nickolas Wheeler with CPW’s outreach coordinator Felice Gritz and Pi Kappa Phi member Jonathon “Jay” Lipko. Artwork by additional Gifted Corner participants.*

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*For more information and high-resolution images, contact Tia Levinson, CPW’s Director of Development and Public Relations, at 914-937-3800 ext. 353 or email [tia.levinson@cpwestchester.org](mailto:tia.levinson@cpwestchester.org).*