



HeartShare Human Services of New York
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Big Steps for Little Feet

(Richmond Hill, NY)— As graduation season draws to a close, it is easy to overlook the littlest graduates—those graduating from Pre-School. But at Heartshare Human Services of New York, it's not a regular pre-school graduation as many of their graduates have developmental delays or disabilities.

Children can enter HeartShare's First Step programs at age 3. While enrolled at one of four sites (two in Richmond Hill, one in Howard Beach, and one in Bay Ridge) the children receive services to help them learn and achieve and get the best start possible in life. Each child's plan is individualized to his or her specific needs and may include: special education services, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. Music therapy and play therapy are also large components of HeartShare's programs.

Some children are enrolled in Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK), a service available to all four-year-old children in New York City. In many cases, HeartShare's UPK classes are integrated, meaning typically developing children are learning alongside their peers with delays or disabilities. Some classes are solely special education classes for those children with greater delays or disabilities.

During the graduation ceremony for the Dolly and Frank Russo, Sr. First Step Early Childhood Center, one representative from each class led the audience in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Each class sang a song that they have been working on for months. Each child, dressed in a cap, gown, and graduation sash, received a diploma and a Proclamation from City Councilman Joseph P. Addabbo, Jr. They were escorted to the podium by their parents because HeartShare believes the family is the most important influence on a child's life.

"Parents play such an integral role in the child's learning," said Program Director Martha Kuszek.

"Parents need to stay involved with their child's learning as they leave HeartShare and enter the public school system."

“This is the first in many graduations to come,” stated Vice President of Education Services Carol Verdi. “HeartShare will remain a resource for these families as they are adjusting to a new school system and as their child gets older and can participate in the agency’s recreation programs.”

When some children enter HeartShare’s First Step Programs, they have difficulty walking or speaking and some have poor social skills. After one or two years of therapies and education, many are walking down the aisle and singing songs. This is truly a milestone for the children and their families. For some children, they will enter the general education program in their local elementary school and others will enroll in the Special Education classes. This graduation marks a momentous occasion for all the strides and accomplishments the children have made. Each child’s progress is truly a success and should be celebrated.

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Celebrating its 92 year, HeartShare is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization that assists more than 16,000 New Yorkers in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. Its wide spectrum of services helps individuals with developmental disabilities, supports people affected by HIV/AIDS, and provides counseling, after-school programs and assistance with foster care and adoption to children and families.