As part of October’s National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrations, we take time to recognize the contributions made by people with disabilities to our society and our workforce.

This edition of the VocRehab Perspective showcases six individuals for their vocational success, which they achieved by means of their own hard work and determination and with some assistance from the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS).

These individuals were honored at our annual Ability Works Recognition Ceremony. Through an internal nomination process, these individuals were selected for their accomplishments and they represent the thousands of people with disabilities that DRS works with on a daily basis.

For me, the occasion always serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of the vocational rehabilitation program and how it directly and distinctly touches the lives of the individuals with whom we work.

As part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrations, we also take time to recognize local businesses and employers who support DRS and its mission of enabling and empowering people with disabilities to work. These partnerships are vital to the success of our clients.

In addition to these statewide celebrations, our district field offices participate in many outreach and recognition events during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Every year, DRS helps thousands of individuals with disabilities to address the barriers that interfere with their capacity to work. They empower themselves as contributing members of our society and they bring a variety of skills into the workplace.

I am proud that we can showcase our Ability Works winners and their accomplishments. They are stellar examples of the contributions people with disabilities are making in the great state of West Virginia.
The West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) held its annual Ability Works Recognition Ceremony on Oct. 16 in the West Virginia Culture Center Theater. The ceremony honored six outstanding individuals who have benefited from services and reached their employment goals.

U.S. Attorney R. Booth Goodwin II provided keynote remarks.

Award recipients were:

**Jean Shepard, State Winner, Wheeling District**

Jean Shepard is legally blind due to a condition called diabetic retinopathy and she has diabetic neuropathy, which makes standing on her feet for long periods of time difficult.

For 57-year-old Shepard, the onset of her blindness was devastating. She had to give up her driver’s license; she was afraid of losing her mobility and independence.

To help her compensate for her vision loss, Shepard received orientation and mobility services from DRS.

“I thought my life was over, and they let me know my life was not over,” explained Shepard. “It was only just beginning.”

“I learned to be able to go downtown, to cross the streets safely, to board a bus, know when to get off the bus, know how to find my way back to the office when left a few blocks away,” she said.

Working with her counselor, Shepard enrolled in DRS’ Randolph-Sheppard Program, which provides training in food service management to eligible DRS clients who are legally blind. Successful participants become self-employed, ultimately operating and managing vending and/or snack bar locations in government buildings.

Shepard worked one-on-one with Randolph-Sheppard Program business counselors and mentored with other licensed vendors at their business locations to learn the specific job requirements. She participated in financial training with a certified accountant/auditor for the program and had to complete and pass a food handling and safety course.

Shepard is now the owner/.operator of Lady Bug Café and Lady Bug Vending. Her café is in the Ohio County Courthouse in Wheeling and she provides vending services at several locations in the Wheeling area.

DRS provided Shepard with some adaptive equipment, including a talking cash register and a money identifier, so she could run her business successfully. In addition to her disability-related issues, Shepard is a domestic abuse survivor.

Shepard admits that she used to have self-esteem problems, but that’s no longer true. She is proud that she overcame being an abused woman, knowing who she is and leaving behind any bitterness.

Shepard is proud to be a contributing, productive member of society.

“I never dreamed that I would have a business, basically of my own creation,” explained Shepard. “I have chosen the name. My heart’s in it. I have found contentment I thought I would never have.”
Kyle Gray, Charleston District

Kyle Gray grew up in Ranson, where he attended Jefferson County High School. Like most students approaching graduation, Gray was not sure what he wanted to do with his life.

In school, Gray experienced difficulty in reading, spelling and math. Wanting to do everything she could to help her son prepare for the world after high school graduation, Gray’s mother referred him to DRS for assistance.

Not long after graduation, Gray relocated to Hurricane with his family. After the move, Gray and Patty Babbitt, DRS rehabilitation counselor, began working together to prepare him for employment.

Gray had no real work experience and found the job application process to be extremely difficult.

HRDF, a community rehabilitation program that DRS uses to provide direct services to clients, arranged for Gray to participate in work adjustment training at a local FoodFair grocery store.

Gray’s work adjustment training helped him improve his work skills and learn specific job tasks including straightening merchandise on the shelves, returning items misplaced by customers, stocking new items, rotating items by date and cleaning shelves.

After completing his training, Gray started looking for a job. According to Babbitt, Gray’s primary obstacles to getting a job were things like completing résumés and interviews. Job placement assistance helped Gray land his job at Walmart.

According to Jerry George, Walmart assistant manager, “Kyle takes care of our shopping carts for our customers. And anything that we need him to do, he jumps right on it.”

“Kyle is a good worker,” said Babbitt. “He tries his best at everything he does. And I am proud of him.”

Eliot Watson, Clarksburg District

Eliot Watson, 28, grew up in Terra Alta, and graduated from Preston County High School. He went on to attend West Virginia University, earning a degree in mechanical engineering.

That same year, Watson sought out DRS. According to Debbie Riggie, a DRS senior rehabilitation counselor, “Eliot has disorganized type schizophrenia.” The new diagnosis caused him to have difficulty with social interaction, getting along with peers and maintaining organizational and planning skills.

Watson was looking for assistance that would help him get back on his feet so he could find his purpose in life.

Watson’s degree is in engineering and that was his ultimate goal, explained Riggie. “When he became ill, he wasn’t able to do that… He just wanted to get back into the world of work.”

Community based assessment and work adjustment training services through Horizon Goodwill Industries in Md. helped Watson to develop and enhance his soft skills and become more prepared to enter employment.

An application to Walgreens resulted in success for Watson. In 2012, he began his job there as a photo specialist.

“He picked his goal and wanted to go for it,” said Riggie. “He has difficulty with social interaction at times, so it was hard for him at first, but he is determined and motivated. He’s got such a good personality. He’s a good asset for any company.”

Since Watson had received the services he needed to overcome the barriers that were keeping him from getting a job, DRS closed his case.

But, Watson wanted to work in the engineering field and he didn’t give up on that goal.

At a career fair hosted by West Virginia University, Watson met the owner of Specialized Engineering. The contact paid off and he’s now employed by the company.

“It feels like when I’m working, I have a purpose, something that I can really show that I’m active and that I was put here to do something,” said Watson. “It’s a terrible thing to waste your life. I want to make my time as worthwhile as I possibly can.”

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Fritz Zacher, Beckley District

Fritz Zacher, 26, is described by medical professionals as having Asperger’s syndrome. But, this extremely bright and artistically talented young man describes himself as the gatekeeper of his own destiny.

According to Nancy Harris, DRS rehabilitation counselor, Zacher has a slightly different perspective than most people, which made things difficult for him socially and vocationally.

From the time he was very young, Zacher demonstrated strong artistic abilities. His parents encouraged his artistic talents, but wanted him to find a job that would support him.

“It was our goal to provide opportunities for Fritz to grow. So, we provided opportunities for him to develop his skills and abilities and build confidence and a sense of competence,” said Harris.

An on-the-job training experience translated into a real job with Monroe County Schools, but it was only part-time, sporadic work. A search began to help Zacher find a second part-time job or a full-time job that fit his abilities.

Mercer County Opportunity Industries (MCOI) in Princeton was looking for someone to work as an assistant in its print shop. They needed a detail-oriented person with an artistic eye, who was capable of doing exacting, tedious and repetitious work.

Keith Frey, MCOI print and sign shop manager, describes Zacher as very coordinated and very task oriented. “Those skills really make him a great fit in the print shop,” said Frey.

Presently, Zacher works two part-time jobs. “Fritz is really very amazing, being able to balance two jobs,” said Harris. “And MCOI has been especially helpful because they’ve allowed him to, at any time, work his custodial job whenever he is called and make up his time at MCOI on other days.”

According to Zacher, “I still have goals for my future that I want to set, ladders to climb, figuratively speaking.”

Steven Blanton, Huntington District

A dramatic change in Steven Blanton’s life forced him to try and find a way to start all over again.

In 2001, Blanton was living in Florida and working in the masonry field. A devastating assault left Steven with a traumatic brain injury, which resulted in permanent loss of his ability to speak, as well as limited use of his right hand.

Due to the severity of his injuries, Blanton spent time recuperating in a rehabilitation center in Florida. Blanton’s family ultimately brought him home to Ceredo, West Virginia, where he currently resides.

According to Mary Klein, senior rehabilitation counselor, communication was Blanton’s most significant barrier to becoming employed. As vocational goals and service needs were discussed, Blanton’s mother assisted and spoke on her son’s behalf.

But, to get a job, a more permanent solution to Blanton’s inability to verbally communicate would have to be found. “He had to be able to communicate with his supervisor, with his coworkers,” Klein explained.

Ultimately, a DynaVox communication device was recommended and purchased for him. The device is like a computer and can be programmed with different phrases to help Blanton communicate his needs.

To enhance and develop his job skills, Blanton participated in work adjustment training through Goodwill Industries in Huntington.

Job placement assistance through Mountain State Center for Independent Living led to a job with Sodexo Food Service in Marshall University’s Harless Dining Hall.

One-on-one job coaching services helped Blanton become familiar with his required job duties, supervisor and coworkers.

Blanton, 47, is happy to be working and self-sufficient again.
Danielle Richardson, Martinsburg District

Danielle Richardson, 29, is a person with profound bilateral hearing loss. She’s also self-motivated and goal-oriented and she wanted to get her education.

After graduating from West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind, Richardson sought out DRS for assistance. Barry Hill, rehabilitation counselor, explained that Richardson had been accepted into Potomac State College.

With college financial assistance from DRS, Richardson graduated from Potomac State in December 2006, with an associate’s degree in early childhood education. And in May 2011, Richardson achieved her bachelor’s degree in child development.

She got a job as education specialist at West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind in January 2012.

According to Christine Frye, director of student living at West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind, “Dani’s job responsibilities are to facilitate and bring education into the dorm for the students. She works on critical skill development for those students who are struggling.”

Some of Richardson’s strongest qualifications, explained Frye, are her degree, training in American Sign Language and her own life experiences of having lived as a person who is deaf.

Richardson admits that trying to find a job was frustrating. “I applied for some positions where they would ask me, ‘How are you going to communicate with us?’” She believes increased awareness of the technology available to accommodate and compensate for communication barriers, as well as increased exposure to deafness, will help discourage these stereotypical attitudes.

Richardson is working on her next big goal, taking graduate classes and working toward her master’s degree.

Richardson never dreamed she’d be working at the school she attended for so many years. But, she loves being there and being a role model for the students. She wants the kids to say, “Dani can do this, therefore, I can do that myself.”

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Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) program evaluation staff introduced other state vocational rehabilitation agencies to technology that can provide clear labor market information that can help vocational rehabilitation agencies meet the employment needs of their consumers.

OnTheMap is an interactive web-based mapping application for creating, printing and viewing various reports about where workers are employed, where they live and the connections between these two locations. It utilizes U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Labor data in conjunction with Local Origin-Destination Employment Statistics.

DRS presented information in Sept. in Providence, R.I. at the 6th Annual Summit on Vocational Rehabilitation Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance, which provides educational experiences and facilitates collaborative conversations to inspire all to move towards excellence in performance management and program evaluation.

DRS also presented information at the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Fall Conference in Denver, Colo. in Nov.

The presentation, “Comprehensive Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Services Delivery System: Proven Outcomes from the West Virginia Transition Youth Community of Practice,” provided an overview of the collaborative relationships between DRS, the West Virginia Department of Education and community rehabilitation programs. These relationships have enabled thousands of West Virginia youth with disabilities to gain quality employment and live independently.

The presentation also focused on the Student Transition to Employment Project (STEP), which enables teachers to become vocational rehabilitation service providers and work with students during the summer and non-school hours. STEP was selected at the national level as a promising practice.

CSAVR comprises the chief administrators of the 80 state-federal vocational rehabilitation agencies across the country.
To show appreciation to local businesses and employers who support the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), a nomination process is utilized to select employers to receive Employer of the Year and Distinguished Employer awards in each district.

“The partnerships with businesses that are jointly developed and nurtured serve as the foundation for our ultimate success,” said Division of Rehabilitation Services Director Donna Ashworth. “The employers recognized are progressive in their attitudes and they empower people with disabilities by providing them with job opportunities.”

Kmart, Charleston
Charleston District Employer of the Year

Kmart consistently demonstrates its willingness to provide employment opportunities to DRS clients. Kmart has opened its doors as a community based assessment site, which provides a short-term job “tryout” with the goal of discovering vocational strengths and weaknesses, for DRS clients.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: Charleston Area Medical Center, Charleston; Mountain State Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons, Huntington; and Smith’s Foodfair, Elkview.

Walmart, Clarksburg
Clarksburg District Employer of the Year

Walmart is an essential employment partner of DRS. The Clarksburg supercenter has hired several DRS clients, reinforcing Walmart’s commitment to supporting inclusion and local communities.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: Morgantown Orthotic & Prosthetic Center, Inc., Morgantown; Hall Neighbors’ House, Buckhannon; Benchmark Hospitality of Stonewall Resort, Roanoke; and Blackwater Falls State Park, Davis.

Ace Hardware, Moundsville
Wheeling District Employer of the Year

This local Ace Hardware store took the company promise of “helping you is the most important thing we have to do today” to heart when the operating manager provided employment to a person with a disability, making appropriate accommodations for the employee to perform the job successfully.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: Foodland, Parkersburg and Kmart, Weirton.

Food Lion, Beckley
Beckley District Employer of the Year

DRS is proud of this ongoing partnership. The store willingly worked with DRS to develop a job for a client, focusing on the individual’s capabilities rather than the limitations, providing workplace accommodations to enable the employee to be a productive member of the store’s workforce.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: Wobo Used Motor Sales & Repairs, Inc., Oak Hill; Wendy’s, Summersville; Kmart, Bluefield; and Foodland, Marlinton.

Walmart, Kimball
Huntington District Employer of the Year

Walmart and DRS have a strong employment partnership. This store is committed to providing job opportunities to DRS clients. Walmart’s human resources manager provides employment opportunities to people with disabilities whenever possible.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: Mingo County Board of Education, Williamson and Pullman Plaza Hotel, Huntington.

Glory Days Grill, Ranson
Martinsburg District Employer of the Year

Glory Days Grill and DRS have built a strong partnership. The restaurant has previously hired DRS clients, but most recently agreed to become a work skills assessment site for a client, which provides job skills training.

Distinguished Employer awards were also presented to: County Pride Foods, Romney; West Virginia Division of Highways, Burlington; and Pilgrim’s Pride Corporation, Moorefield.
Training focuses on successful transition of West Virginia youth with disabilities

DRS brought together 123 employees for a training conference to focus on issues related to assisting youth with disabilities to transition from high school to post-secondary education or employment. DRS transition counselors, employment specialists, rehabilitation services associates, branch office managers and district managers attended the Sept. 4 – 6 training at The Resort at Glade Springs.

“Nearly 42 percent of the Division’s client population are transition students,” said DRS Director Donna Ashworth. “It’s imperative that our staff stay current on practices and trends in this field so that we can do the best job possible in helping these individuals to prepare for their future.”

The training provided updates in the areas of financial aid, connecting individualized education plans (IEP) to post-school success and psychological assessments in rehabilitation planning, as well as presentations about specialized DRS programs that can assist transition counselors.

Karen Ruddle, Special Education Coordinator for the state Department of Education, discusses connections between the IEP and transition services for improving student success.

Deon Carter, DRS Employment Specialist, interacts with conference presenters.

DRS procurement manager receives state recognition

Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Procurement Manager Charlyn Miller was honored by the West Virginia Purchasing Division as the Agency Procurement Officer of the Year.

Miller received the award for her dedicated work toward the betterment of the state purchasing process in West Virginia. She has worked at DRS since 2006 and has 20 years of experience working in state procurement.

West Virginia Purchasing Director Dave Tincher presented the award to Miller at the West Virginia Purchasing Division’s Agency Purchasing Conference held at Stonewall Resort in late October.

Tincher recognized Miller’s vast purchasing knowledge, her dedication to training and her commitment to professional development. She has attained State Procurement Certification and is working towards national certification through the Universal Public Procurement Certification Council.

Miller is honored by the acknowledgment. “It’s nice to be recognized by the profession that I have been working in for the last 20 years,” said Miller.

According to DRS Director Donna Ashworth, “The recognition bestowed on Ms. Miller shines a positive light, not only on her work, but on DRS as well.”

Miller was one of two individuals recognized this year by the West Virginia Purchasing Division, which has presented the Agency Procurement Officer of the Year award for 18 years.

Pictured left to right are Lisa Bird, DRS Procurement Secretary; Evelyn Smith, DRS Procurement Administrative Assistant; Charlyn Miller, DRS Procurement Manager; Dave Tincher, Purchasing Director; Aaron Johnson, DRS Administrative Services Assistant Director; and Martha McKee, Education and the Arts Deputy Cabinet Secretary.
Did you know?

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a free and confidential resource on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. They work toward practical solutions that benefit both employer and employee.

JAN offers one-on-one guidance on workplace accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and self-employment options for people with disabilities. Private employers of all sizes, government agencies, employee representatives and service providers, as well as people with disabilities and their families, can benefit from JAN's services.

JAN is a service provided by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Its development has been achieved through the collaborative efforts of ODEP, West Virginia University and private industry throughout North America.

Visit askjan.org for more information.