



**WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND THE ARTS
DIVISION OF REHABILITATION SERVICES**

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NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Six West Virginians honored for vocational excellence

Institute, W.Va. (Oct. 22, 2009) – Six West Virginians were recognized today by the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) for exemplary vocational rehabilitation.

The honorees, whose career paths range from accounting to law enforcement to nursing, received their Ability Works recognition awards during an Oct. 22 ceremony in Institute. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

“Working with their own strength and determination, using this bridge of support and assistance from the Division of Rehabilitation Services, today’s winners have earned their employment success,” said keynote speaker Natalie Tennant, West Virginia Secretary of State.

The annual awards honor one exemplary candidate from each of the agency’s six districts.

Each year, DRS vocational rehabilitation counselors help thousands of West Virginia residents with disabilities lead more productive, fulfilling lives. The agency provides work-related counseling, training, job placement and other vocational rehabilitation services through 31 field offices statewide.

For more information about DRS and its programs, call 1-800-642-8207 (V/TDD) or visit the division’s Web site at www.wvdrs.org/.

Gary Hefner, Beckley District, Statewide Award Winner

Gary Hefner, 40, of Marlinton, spends his days taking care of other people, now that he’s taken care of some health issues that troubled him for much of his young life.

Hefner, a licensed practical nurse at Greenbrier Valley Medical Center, is the 2009 Ability Works statewide award winner. He represents the Beckley District, comprising Raleigh, Mercer, Summers, Monroe, Greenbrier, Fayette, Nicholas, Braxton, Webster and Pocahontas counties.

Several childhood surgeries for a club foot left Hefner with scar tissue that led to recurring inflammation and pain in the bones of his right foot. To treat the infection, the doctor gave Hefner a choice to place screws in his leg or to amputate. Hefner chose amputation.

“I actually don’t look at it as a disability,” Hefner said, “because I feel a lot better than I did before.” He uses a prosthetic leg below his right knee.

When he sought help from DRS in 2004, Hefner was trying to manage both diabetes and hypertension without medication. A stroke only four years earlier had prompted him to lose 77 pounds by maintaining a healthy diet and rigorous exercise program. DRS Rehabilitation Counselor Nancy Harris says this perseverance was an indication of his positive attitude and self-discipline.

“He was anxious to return to work to be able to adequately provide for his family, to restore his sense of purpose and self-worth, and to use his talents and abilities to help others,” Harris said.

Hefner scored exceptionally well on the entrance exam for nursing school, then completed an impressive interview and all the necessary medical exams. DRS assisted him with the resources for training and travel, because the closest nursing program meant a daily drive of more than 90 miles across mountainous roads in extreme weather.

Despite the constant academic demands of the nursing program, Harris said, Hefner faced every obstacle with incredible calm and surmounted every hurdle – from sick children to frequent mechanical problems with his vehicle.

“There was never any question about Gary’s intellectual capabilities, commitment to his chosen vocation, or any question about his personal qualities of caring and compassion so necessary in the nursing field,” Harris said.

In April 2008, Hefner was hired at Greenbrier Valley Medical Center as a licensed practical nurse. Hefner says he is proud to give back to the profession that helped him so much as a boy.

“I had many surgeries where there were nurses that took great care of me,” he said.

Hefner’s helpful attitude is what makes him a good employee, along with his willingness to do whatever he can to give his patients the best experience possible, according to Michelle Carpenter, Greenbrier Valley’s Nursing Director of Medical Surgical Pediatrics. “It’s never good to be in the hospital,” she said, “but Gary goes above and beyond with his patients.”

Dan Clarkson, Charleston District Award Winner

Dan Clarkson, 45, of St. Albans, has defied the odds, surviving a terrible motorcycle accident while nurturing an optimism that drives his life and his work.

Clarkson is the 2009 Ability Works award winner for the agency’s Charleston District, comprising Kanawha, Boone, Clay, Calhoun, Roane, Jackson, Mason and Putnam counties. The awards are presented each October during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

DRS Senior Rehabilitation Counselor Cynthia Lokey describes his road to recovery as “rough.” Yet somehow, struggling through his own physical rehabilitation and the death of his wife, Clarkson never lost sight of his goal to return to a normal way of life.

“His best characteristic is that he just doesn’t give up,” Lokey said.

Clarkson sought help from DRS to provide him with occupational and physical therapies he needed to recover from a spinal cord injury and return to his law enforcement career. Tasks that once were mundane, such as answering phones and pulling files, had to be relearned to perform his job as a protective services worker in the Kanawha County Sheriff's office.

DRS provided Clarkson with physical therapy, occupational therapy, driver evaluation and vehicle modifications, assistive devices and home modifications. He used assistive devices and hand controls in his car until he was able to care for himself and regain his mobility.

Through it all, until her sudden death from a cerebral hemorrhage, his wife Susan remained his inspiration.

"She always knew I would walk again," Clarkson said, "and got me to walk again before she passed away."

Clarkson's resilience is reflected in his character as well as his work ethic. His employer, Kanawha County Sheriff Mike Rutherford, says the department is lucky to have him. "I could not ask for a better employee," Rutherford said.

The day before his accident, he participated in the local March of Dimes charity fundraiser walk. He has remained a loyal participant since, showing up in his wheelchair for the past two years to help raise money.

Clarkson proves that with the right way of thinking, almost anything can be accomplished. "If you ever have an injury," he said, "faith in God and the attitude to never quit is the best advice."

Kalin Hanlan, Clarksburg District Award Winner

Because of her warm, cheerful personality and her enthusiasm for her job, 22-year-old Kalin Hanlan is the perfect hostess.

These qualities that made her successful in a busy Applebee's restaurant caused her to be honored as the Ability Works award winner for the agency's Clarksburg District, comprising Monongalia, Marion, Preston, Harrison, Taylor, Barbour, Tucker, Randolph, Upshur, Lewis and Gilmer counties.

Hanlan, of Bridgeport, was referred to DRS in high school and wanted assistance in developing her interests into a possible career. At birth, she was diagnosed with a learning disability as well as retinal degeneration, causing vision impairment and mobility problems which made it difficult to obtain employment without the support of counselors and job coaches.

"I was still in high school," Hanlan said, "and I wanted to take some time to think about what I wanted to do."

DRS Rehabilitation Counselor Patricia Shingleton says Hanlan kept in touch daily during her job search. "She's worked really hard," Shingleton said. "She was very motivated when she initially came in to find work."

DRS' initial assessments suggested Hanlan would benefit from working with a job coach, so she was referred to a local rehabilitation provider. Job Squad, Inc. helped her fill out

applications and taught her valuable interviewing skills that helped prepare her for a successful job search.

“Kalin just stayed right on top of any job search assistance we were providing her, and was very motivated the entire time to locate employment,” Shingleton said.

Hanlan’s outgoing personality indicated to Shingleton that she would work well with the public. Her job search included opportunities as a receptionist as well as work in restaurants, childcare and other retail businesses. She found a job as a hostess at Applebee’s in Clarksburg, and has been working there part time for one and a half years.

She enjoys her job, and not surprisingly she enjoys the social aspect of being a hostess. “I like getting a paycheck, just being around people and getting to know the people I work with,” Hanlan said.

Carolyn Hancock, Wheeling District Award Winner

Carolyn Hancock’s dynamic personality is as great an asset as her accounting skills at Wheeling Island Hotel, Casino and Racetrack, where she has been a revenue auditor since January 2008.

Hancock, 49, is the 2009 Ability Works award winner for the agency’s Wheeling District, comprising Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, Marshall, Wetzel, Tyler, Doddridge, Ritchie, Pleasants, Wood and Wirt counties.

Originally from Yosemite National Park in California, Hancock moved to Wheeling when her husband was transferred to a new job. She thought finding a good job here would be simple, but soon realized she needed help reaching her employment goals.

“Carolyn understood she was working below her limits,” said Michelle Hogan, DRS counselor for the deaf and hard of hearing. “She was more than willing to come to us and ask for assistance to help her work to her full potential.”

Hancock also worked with DRS Rehabilitation Counselor Faith Hicks, who suggested she go back to school to finish her bachelor’s degree in accounting. She enrolled as a part-time student at Wheeling Jesuit University and found part-time employment as a finance assistant with Wheeling Housing Authority – all while raising two young boys.

After assessing her needs, DRS provided college financial assistance and an interpreter to help in her classes, job interviews, job testing, job orientation and training.

It took seven years to finish her degree, but then she was hired full time as a revenue auditor at Wheeling Island, where she also assists in communicating with other employees who are deaf or have profound hearing loss.

Patrick Fox, vice president of finance at Wheeling Island, says Hancock’s commitment to success is demonstrated in her hard work and her ability to be a great team player.

“She is simply a role model because she has demonstrated that she can overcome obstacles in her life to be what she wants to be,” Fox said. “We are blessed to have Carolyn on our staff.”

Justin Booth, Huntington District Award Winner

Justin Booth, a 28-year-old Kroger pharmacist from Stollings, has never let anything stand in the way of fulfilling his dream of becoming a pharmacist. His persistence is one reason Booth is the 2009 Ability Works award winner for the agency's Huntington District, comprising Cabell, Wayne, Lincoln, Mingo, Logan, Wyoming and McDowell counties.

Booth is a retail pharmacist at the Kroger Pharmacy in Logan, an achievement he says may not have been possible without the resources he was provided at DRS. With assistance from a vocational rehabilitation counselor, he was able to transition easily from Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College to West Virginia University's School of Pharmacy.

Southern is a fairly small community college, but still larger than the Christian high school from which Booth had graduated. "I didn't know how I was going to go to a new town and a big school, coming from a graduating class of 10," Booth said. "My first chemistry class in Morgantown had about 250 people in it."

Booth was born with Holt-Oram Syndrome, a limb abnormality that affects bones in the wrist. He has short arms and no thumbs as a result, as well as a heart problem commonly associated with the syndrome.

"My dexterity with my disability limits me a little bit," Booth said, "What may take five minutes for somebody else that doesn't have the disability to do may take me 15 minutes, but it comes out the same way and sometimes even better."

He was receiving rehabilitation services in high school when Rehabilitation Counselor Debra Baisden-Fields took charge of his case. At the time, he had no classroom accommodations but was still maintaining between a 3.5 and 3.75 grade point average.

Booth came to DRS seeking resources. He wanted to be able to call DRS to ask for help or recommendations about how to achieve his ultimate vocational goal. DRS provided vocational counseling and guidance, and financial assistance for the college and university training required for Booth to be a licensed pharmacist. Baisden-Fields said she tried to get Booth to use assistive technology during his schooling, but he preferred to do it his way.

"He's learned his own techniques and styles," Baisden-Fields said. "I've never seen anything really that he cannot do as well as everybody else does."

Booth is pleased with the help he received from DRS. "I couldn't have asked for anything better," he said.

His employer, Kroger Supervising Pharmacist Tucker Shelton, believes that Booth has no limit to his abilities. "A lot of it is determination," Shelton said. "Justin is very dependable and has great morals and ethics."

Along with his impeccable work ethic, Shelton says, Booth is one of the hardest working employees he has ever had. "He just doesn't stop," Shelton said.

Booth said he loves his job and helping people. He considers pharmacists to be the most accessible medical professionals because on Saturdays and late nights, the pharmacist is often the only healthcare professional available.

“That’s a niche that I as a pharmacist can adapt to and feel good about,” Booth said.

Donna Southerly, Martinsburg District Award Winner

Donna Southerly has transformed herself in just five years, socially and vocationally. Her eagerness to learn and rise above physical challenges has turned a shy, restrained person into a confident, outgoing woman.

Southerly, 59, a Hardy County resident, is the 2009 Ability Works award winner for the agency’s Martinsburg District, comprising Berkeley, Jefferson, Morgan, Hampshire, Mineral, Hardy, Grant and Pendleton counties. The awards are presented each October during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Southerly first came to DRS in 2004 after gastric bypass surgery for obesity. Before this surgery, she had spent 20 years unemployed and five years restricted to her house because of immobility issues. These problems took a toll on her confidence, as well as her understanding and knowledge of up-to-date technology, all of which she felt hindered her re-entry to the workforce.

She had spent two months searching for jobs with no success, and was unsure of what she wanted, but DRS Rehabilitation Counselor Linda Porter helped her discover her vocational goals.

DRS provided tuition assistance, counseling and training that helped Southerly earn her associate degree in science and encouraged her to pursue the Regents Bachelor of Arts degree at West Virginia University, which she will complete in 2010. She may work later toward a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling or social work.

“Donna is the best student I’ve had in my five years working at DRS,” Porter said. “If you met her today, you would never believe that she used to be insecure.”

Southerly’s need to achieve has made her a good student and a good employee. During her undergraduate career, making B’s was just not good enough. Her final grade point average was 3.94.

She is an equally remarkable employee.

“Donna is a people person,” Snyder said, “and wants to learn more in every aspect of the job, which helps everyone out.”

Southerly likes the change she sees in herself. “Today I am outgoing, have self-confidence and know that there’s nothing that I can’t accomplish,” she said.

“She has so many options, and with her personality and outgoingness she will go places,” Porter said.

Because of her own experience, Southerly loves to help the students who come to Eastern. Several of them have come from DRS and she loves to see the difference Eastern and education has made in their lives.

To Southerly, the most important part of her job is giving the same encouragement to others that she has received. “Someone was there for me,” she said, “and I would like to be there for them.”
