

ALABAMA COUNCIL FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

ACDD *Advocate*

Volume II Number 4, Winter 2008



EMPLOYMENT:
*A Focus
on Abilities*



THE FEDERAL DEFINITION OF
Developmental Disability

A. The term "developmental disability" means a severe, chronic disability of an individual that is:

- attributable to a mental and/or physical impairment
- is manifested before the individual attains age 22
- is likely to continue indefinitely
- results in substantial functional limitations in 3 or more of the following areas of major life activity:
 - (1) self-care
 - (2) receptive and expressive language
 - (3) learning
 - (4) mobility
 - (5) self-direction
 - (6) capacity for independent living
 - (7) economic self-sufficiency
- reflects the individual's need for a combination and sequence of special, interdisciplinary, or generic services, individualized supports, or other forms of assistance that are of life long or extended duration and are individually planned and coordinated.

B. Infants and young children:

An individual from birth to age 9, inclusive, who has a substantial developmental delay or specific congenital or acquired condition, may be considered to have a developmental disability without meeting 3 or more of the criteria (listed above) ... if the individual, without services and supports, has a high probability of meeting those criteria later in life.

From the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, 2000 Reauthorization, Public Law 106-402, S. 1809-7(8).

ACDD *Advocate*

Vol. II, No. 4

Winter 2008

The ACDD Advocate is published quarterly by the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities.

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DISCLAIMER: All direct quotations and other information represented through interviews in this magazine are the opinions of the speakers, and do not necessarily represent the position of the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities or the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

Letter from the Governor



Bob Riley, Governor

STATE OF ALABAMA

Greetings:

I was pleased to announce recently that Alabama's unemployment rate fell to a new record low, declining to 3.1 percent in October, the lowest monthly unemployment rate in the history of our state. This was well below the national rate, which stood at 4.7 percent. Alabama also added almost

25,000 new jobs last year, a remarkable number for a state with a population such as ours.

Legislators also joined me in finally passing tax relief for working families. That change ended our dishonorable distinction of having the lowest tax threshold in America, which unfairly burdened our lowest-income wage earners. But we still haven't done enough, especially now when so many families and individuals need help, I'm urging legislators to once again work with me in approving a tax relief package during the upcoming legislative session. We can and we should cut the tax burden on our working families because it's the right thing to do.

On a related note, I am proposing legislation that will encourage even more job growth in our state by urging the legislature to approve a Work Opportunity Income Tax Credit (WOTC) for Alabama. This bill will be 20 percent of the value of the federal WOTC. For example, an employer who has a single qualified employee who has been employed for at least 400 hours will receive a federal credit equal to \$2,400 per year. In addition to this, the employer will receive a credit equal to \$480 against his state income taxes. Encourage your legislator to support this bill that will encourage job growth in Alabama.

This bill also creates an incentive for employers to hire Alabama workers with disabilities. In this issue of the ACDD Advocate that focuses on employment we see many, many examples of how our citizens with developmental disabilities are not only capable employees, but enthusiastic, loyal and outstanding workers. Many of our citizens with disabilities find special richness and meaning in work that goes far beyond a paycheck.

Furthermore, from a practical, economic standpoint, we simply cannot afford to leave any of our citizens behind. As a researcher in Auburn's Autism Center points out, the long-term costs of failing to train and employ our citizens with disabilities are staggering. Look at the examples in this issue of James Watkins of Protective Life in Birmingham, and Clint Usher of Merrill Lynch in Montgomery. Hiring people with disabilities is not only the right thing to do, but it can also work very well for the most competitive and profitable of companies at every level.

I applaud the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities, and especially the employers and employees featured in this issue, for showing the way forward in terms of providing opportunities for our citizens with disabilities. In these and countless other examples across the state, we see more and more people focusing on abilities rather than disabilities. And that, my fellow Alabamians, is definitely the right thing to do.

From the Council Chair



Philip Young, Council Chair

ALABAMA COUNCIL FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

This issue of the *ACDD Advocate* is dedicated to employment. Our focus is on the abilities of individuals. The success of the individuals featured is a small sample of how meaningful employment enhances individuals and organizations in a positive manner. Many

with the potential, ability and desire are still seeking opportunities.

The U.S. Department of Labor has identified the need for supporting an inclusive workplace for individuals with disabilities. Innovations for employment and promotions are encouraged with supported strategies. Please visit www.dol.gov/odep to learn more about proven efforts of large and small corporations. Many corporations have made the commitment to integrate a full range of initiatives that include internships, recruiting, mentoring, hiring, and promoting people with disabilities.

"Self Actualization," is neatly summed up by Dr. Abraham Maslow: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This is the need we call self actualization. It refers to man's desire to fulfillment. Namely to the tendency for him to become what he potentially can be: to become everything that he is capable of becoming."

We all have different gifts and abilities but we all desire for fulfillment. A society, organization or business that empowers and allows opportunities for all its individuals to have real choices and real jobs will grow and prosper. Salt and culture go back thousands of years. Roman soldiers received salt rations known as "salary argentum." Our English word salary comes from this Latin phrase. A good pay check does wonders for all of us.

Salt has been used to preserve, provide flavor and can permeate food. All of us have the gift of salt that can contribute the utmost value to the work place.

A fully inclusive workplace carries great economic and social benefits. The cost to our economy of *not* acting is billions of dollars. The cost to society is even greater. Dependency and non-productivity are not worthy goals. A workplace that embraces the diversity of developmental disabilities will help us all in our quest for a better world and self actualization.



STATE OF ALABAMA

Bob Riley, Governor

A Letter from the *Executive Director*



Elmyra Jones, Executive Director

ALABAMA COUNCIL FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

The Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities works in many ways – in conjunction with our sister agencies ADAP in Tuscaloosa and the Civitan Center for Excellence in Birmingham – to focus on the ABILITIES of people with developmental disabilities. We do this through our advocacy efforts, research, grantmaking activities, and our diverse attempts to influence policymakers and the general public to become more aware of the issues that affect all of our stakeholders.

This fall, the Council voted to engage in a public awareness campaign by placing billboards around the state that encourage our citizens to “Look at my ABILITY!” We have received a tremendous amount of positive feedback on this effort, and know that hundreds of thousands of people have seen this simple message that we all should take to heart.

In this issue of the *ACDD Advocate* we have focused on an issue of critical importance to people in the disabilities community: Employment. We see examples of the many ways employers are reaching out and realizing the positive benefits of hiring people with disabilities. More often than not these employers find that workers with disabilities have a kind of dedication and focus on their job that they do not often see in new employees. We see ways our schools and state agencies are helping young people transition from school to the workplace, and train workers with disabilities to take their place as a permanent part of the employment landscape in Alabama. We also see researchers explaining the long-term benefits of supported employment, and pointing up the practical, economically-based reasons we must make sure that none of our citizens are left behind.

We must all work together to ensure that full, meaningful employment is available to everyone who seeks a job. The first step in doing this, of course, is to make sure that when we look at someone we first see his or her ABILITY.

Vocational Rehab

*helps people find jobs,
focuses on ability*



In the world of disabilities - whether it be mental illness, substance abuse, or developmental disabilities - people often talk of “navigating the system.”

This includes the obstacles people must overcome to get treatment, qualify for benefits, or have certain rights and privileges restored.

The difficulty of navigating this system is one of the things that seems most unfair to people with

disabilities; things seem unfairly stacked against the people who most need and deserve them.

Another key element to the “system” is gaining employment. In the State of Alabama, for people with disabilities getting a job very often means working with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) vocational rehabilitation program. Vocational Rehabilitation Service (VRS), a division of ADRS, serves teenagers and adults with disabilities seeking employment.

This may include working with students in middle schools, high schools, junior colleges and universities statewide to help them receive appropriate educational supports in preparation for employment.

VRS proudly points out that its job placement network has a positive return for the state and its taxpayers. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration, for every dollar spent on a VRS client who becomes employed, more than \$20 is returned to the economy through employment.



Byron White, a Vocational Rehab Program Specialist, said his agency works with people who have every kind of disability: mental illness, physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, autism, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy just to name a few. VRS proudly points out that its job placement network has a positive return for the state and its tax-

al, White explained. "To be eligible means the client is determined to have a disability that would present functional limitations to gaining and maintaining employment without our help."

Once the client is determined to be eligible for VR services, the Rehab Counselor works with the client to develop an Individualized Employment Plan, or IPE. The IPE outlines the services the client will receive from VRS, with the goal being to place the client in the most occupationally-appropriate job that he or she desires. This step sometimes requires vocational testing to see what kind of work the client is best suited for.

One specialized service available through VRS for individuals with the most severe disabilities is supported employment, White said.

"We really work with all kinds of people," White said. "Our goal is to help people become employed and stay employed. Last year we closed out 7,802 clients into full employment. And the first step in gaining employment is to contact one of our district VRS offices."

How the system works

There are 21 VRS districts across the state. People with disabilities come to one of these offices when they are ready to begin the process of preparing for employment. For young adults with disabilities this process often starts while participating in a transition program within their high school.

Once a client is in a VRS district office, a VR counselor conducts an initial interview to begin the process of determining eligibility for services. In addition to the interview, the counselor will make arrangements to obtain medical and psychological records, and other pertinent information that will be beneficial in assisting the individual,

"If supported employment is required, the client is referred to one of the supported employment providers funded by ADRS. These providers begin the actual steps of moving the individual into competitive employment."

Supported employment has continued to expand and improve in Alabama in recent years. White added that when he became a supported employment specialist with Vocational Rehab in 1997, there were just 23 providers statewide as opposed to the 38 that now exist.

"Many of these additional providers are in areas of the state not previously served. Some of the areas include Selma, Ozark, Oneonta, Jasper, Demopolis, Fayette and Scottsboro. We're no longer just centered in Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile and Montgomery. So that's a real move forward both for us and our clients."

Once an individual is ready to participate in supported employment he or she is referred to one of the 38 supported employment providers funded by ADRS. These providers are paid utilizing an outcome-based payment system, which is also called Milestones. There are four milestones that the individual must complete prior to achieving a successful employment outcome. These milestones are as follows:

Milestone I

"This milestone is defined as the determination of needs," White said. "A provider works with the client to determine his or her skills, abilities, and job preferences. The provider reviews the documentation from VRS and basically just gets to know the client. They do at least two situational assessments in a community setting and from these they determine what employment direction to take."

Meanwhile, the provider or job coach has been out in the community marketing job development possibilities to local businesses and industries who might be willing and able to hire clients with disabilities.

The needs determination summary is reported back to VR. Based on this assessment the provider or job coach, with input from the job candidate, of course, recommends the kind of job for which the candidate is best suited.

"We are always driven by consumer choice," White emphasized.

Once this stage is successfully completed the provider receives payment from Vocational Rehabilitation. As mentioned earlier, successfully placed job candidates have a better than 20:1 return on every dollar invested in their job placement. But providers do not get paid unless they succeed at placing candidates themselves, so the motivation to get candidates into and established in the workplace is strong on every end.

Milestone II

The next step after determining the need is to actually get out there, find a job, and help the client get hired.

"Based on input from the client and the IPE, the client is hired into the workplace," White said. "This is the second phase of the process, and after the client has spent three days on the job the provider is paid. Again, the provider must submit required documentation to the VR counselor."

Milestone III

Once the client has been hired, job coaching begins.

"At this point the client is on the job. In most cases job coaching and necessary supports are being provided. This coaching is provided as long as necessary and until the client is able to function at the work site independent of the job coach. We must make sure that the client receives the amount of coaching necessary to ensure a successful employment outcome," White said.

While each milestone has required paperwork that must be submitted to the VR counselor for payment, Milestone III requires some of the most important documentation. This paperwork includes both an employer and client satisfaction form. It is important to make sure that everyone is happy prior to proceeding on to the final milestone. In addition, the most important piece of paperwork, the "Extended Services Plan," is completed during Milestone III.

This document outlines the support needs that must continue to be assessed and addressed throughout the life of the job and even after VR has successfully closed the individual into employment. The provider who provides the milestones pro-

gram continues to facilitate the provision of the long-term support services.

Milestone IV

The sought-after outcome of the whole VR job placement procedure comes when the client is successfully on the job, has met all required employment criteria, and is considered "rehabilitated" by the VR counselor.

"This stage is called 'closure,'" White said. "For closure to occur the worker must have been on the job at least 90 days beyond stabilization and received adequate training and support after being hired. Again, both the employer and the client must indicate satisfaction with the job. This is done by completing a formal client and employer satisfaction form."

At this point, the provider receives the final milestones payment.

Throughout the process, each provider is eligible for four payments if the client is successful at reaching closure. Each payment is a percentage of the total fee charged by the provider to offer supported employment to the client. These payments are as follows:

- Milestone I 15% payment
- Milestone II 20% payment
- Milestone III 30% payment
- Milestone IV 35% payment

Obviously, the financial reward for the provider is on the closure end as opposed to the beginning phase of assessment. As mentioned earlier, the payments to the provider are performance based. The maximum fee can't exceed \$5,800 per worker.

Once the case is closed, the supported employment provider continues to provide necessary supports for the life of the job. VR funding ceases and the provider must seek out other funding resources to provide and facilitate long-term supports. Many providers are utilizing SSA work incentives and Medicaid Waivers.

"The level of the support needed really depends on the level of the worker's disability," White concluded. "In addition to the good return on the taxpayer's investment with a successful employment outcome, the worker himself or herself has achieved the satisfaction of being independent, employed, and making important contributions to the job and the community. It's really good all the way around."



White is more about people than process

Byron White enjoys seeing the VR process at work, and seeing people with disabilities enter the workforce.

"I've always wanted to help people and this is the best way I can do it," said White, Program Specialist with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services.

"I'm much more into people than the process, but when you work with so many individuals and agencies you must have procedures in place that work and keep everyone accountable."

White came to his job honestly. After an early internship experience at Easter Seals Central Alabama, he went on the University of Alabama to obtain his master's of social work.

After spending a short period of time working with the Alabama Department of Youth Services, White realized his love was working with people with disabilities. Fortunately, Easter Seals called him back to work in their evaluation and program management department. This opened the door for him to become a Rehabilitation Counselor in 1989.

"I have a passion for it," he said. "This is a rewarding job. I see someone totally dependent on society gaining their independence through working and there is no amount of money that can make up for how important that is. It's so great to see someone get their own home, and realize their dreams. Their families love it. Everyone loves it."

"People are out there looking for an opportunity and our agency provides that opportunity. Money is a motivator in this process but it's much, much more than that. People just want to be accepted as part of the community, and we are fortunate to be in a position to help them do that."

AL-APSE Conference

focuses on employment

By Byron White

The 9th Annual Alabama APSE conference was held August 20 – 22, 2007 in Mobile at the Riverview Plaza Hotel. Approximately 250 individuals attended this year's event, which had as its theme "AL-APSE... Changing the Face of Employment." The conference kicked off with an awards luncheon recognizing winners in the following categories: Personal Achievement, Best Practices, Employer of the Year, Family of the Year, Professional of the Year, and Leadership.

Attendees were able to participate in a large number of breakout sessions as well as four general sessions. The conference featured the following keynote speakers: Mike Royer NBC 13, Birmingham, Peggy Anderson,

Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Neil Romano, founder of America's Strength Foundation and recently appointed, subject to Senate confirmation, as the Director of ODEP.

This year's closing speaker was Kate Adamson, who overcame Locked-in-Syndrome (complete paralysis, unable

to move, speak, or even blink). Kate wowed the audience with her presentation, "One Hand Clapping: Appreciation Before Accommodation." Her message was that

the ability to clap using only one hand doesn't necessarily make someone a better worker or executive; but if someone has persisted in spite of disabilities, that person may develop uncommon determination and resourcefulness.

Some attendees chose to participate in "certificate-based job coach training" that ran concurrently with the conference. This track was taught by consultants from Virginia Commonwealth University. Also, sessions were offered that focused on leadership. AL-APSE has been working on a strategic plan to develop future leaders for the organization. Please visit the AL-APSE website for information on how you might become a member of the Board.

Other highlights of the conference included the annual silent auction which is a fundraiser to support the Dine Barclay Scholarship. This scholarship is awarded each year to send a self-advocate or family member to the national APSE conference. For more information on this scholarship, please visit the AL-APSE website at www.al-apse.org or email AL-APSE at alabamaapse@aol.com. In addition, attendees let their hair down a little during the first ever "Alabama APSE Has Talent" contest. Attendees sang, danced, and told stories.

Overall, the 9th annual AL-APSE conference was a big hit. Those attending came from all across the state. Special guests included Mr. John Houston, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health (DHM/MR), and Mr. Steve Shivers, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS), Ms. Patricia Martin, Associate Commissioner of DMH/MR and Mr. Jim Harris III, Assistant Commissioner of ADRS.

Plans are now underway for the 10th annual conference scheduled for June 11 – 13, 2008 at the Marriott Renaissance Hotel in Montgomery.

Her message was that the ability to clap using only one hand doesn't necessarily make someone a better worker or executive; but if someone has persisted in spite of disabilities, that person may develop uncommon determination and resourcefulness.



Transition Coordinator

focuses on

student success

"I define transition as the movement of students from high school to post-school, whatever that may be," said Linda Hames, State Transition Coordinator for Vocational Rehabilitation Service, a division of the State of Alabama Department of Rehabili-

"Some of our students are employed right away when they leave school, but need continuing job supports," Hames said. "Our school-based job coaches don't follow them once they exit school, either because they have received a diploma or certificate or because they have reached age 21. So if supports are still needed they work with our contract VR providers."

ation Services. "Post-school may mean more school, it may mean work, or it may mean going home. Transition is a process

by which this movement is smoothed for the student. Our emphasis is on school and work, of course, and to find alternatives to one of our young people just going home and staying there."

Early and careful planning is the central focus of a successful transition, Hames said. Such planning begins with the student, and involves his or her family, teachers, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors, and any other agencies that may be involved.

"For every high school in Alabama we have a transition counselor," Hames said.

"One counselor may serve several schools, of course. We have a total of 53 counselors in our school systems."

Many of these VR counselors are dedicated transition counselors. In more rural areas they may serve in other capacities in addition to their roles as transition counselors. But they are all very visible, and are all involved in developing the student's Individualized Education Plan, or IEP.

A transition student is really any student with a disability.

"Our transition students fit into three major categories," Hames said. "They might be from Special Education. They might come from a 504 Plan, which means the student needs accommodations but not necessarily from Special Education. That

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Youth Leadership Forum and Young Adults in Transition

Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) is a five-day program that develops leadership skills for youth with disabilities in Alabama. Using both small- and large-group activities, some of the YLF activities include visiting the state capitol and meeting the Governor, career planning, studying technological resources, hearing a motivational speaker, and perhaps most importantly, matching students with mentors who have a similar disability. Participants also learn about disability history.

Of the many young people who apply, 25-30 are selected based on various criteria. The program is held on the campus of

Troy University, and there is no charge for delegates and volunteers.

"After the forum and upon their return to their individual communities, we want them to reapply what they have learned," said Linda Hames, State Transition Coordinator and a YAIT Advisor. "We also want them to return as staff members for new students coming into the program and help develop a new class of leaders."

A next step is for these graduates is to apply for Young Adults in Transition (YAIT). These young adults with disabilities will make recommendations to state policy-makers on improving transition services.

With a mission statement of "Young adults helping other young adults transition to the real world," the goals of YAIT are to increase communication between service providers, increase disability awareness in the community, and increase resources to provide better transition services.

Jane Trumbull and Stephanie Zito, graduate student researchers in the Transition Leadership Institute at Auburn University, were part of the initial YAIT retreat.

"It truly exceeded our expectations," Trumbull said. "Even though we know these young people are full of self-determination it was still amazing to see. By the end of the weekend they were really speaking out, showing a kind of confidence that was not present at the start of the event."

Zito agreed. "What was unique was to have teachers, counselors, parents, and students in transition all in the same place," she said. "Everyone was able to hear the others' perspective in a way that is not usually available. And everyone appreciated this. It was a new way of hearing, and even empowered some of the siblings who attended."

"A young adult with autism was there and was very much a part of the energy," Zito continued. "He engaged in self-stimulation – shouting out and walking around in the middle of a dialogue – but was right on target when he came back and resumed. For example, he thought it was wrong that he wasn't invited to plan his IEP. And it was wrong. Everyone there got to see that."

the local school system paying the other half. They are focused on students who will seek employment rather than more schooling and typically come onto the scene once the VR counselor has worked with the student.

"Some of our students are employed right away when they leave school, but

need continuing job supports," Hames said. "Our school-based job coaches don't follow them once they exit school, either because they have received a diploma or certificate or because they have reached age 21. So if supports are still needed they work with our contract VR providers."

Transition

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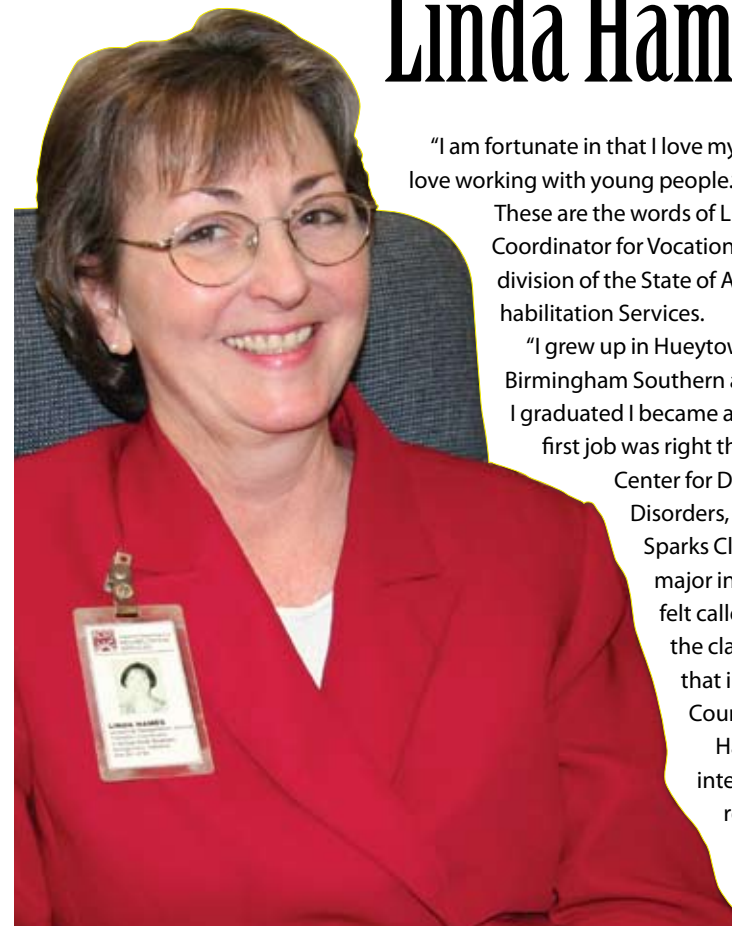
student might have ADD, for example, or hearing loss. Or the student might have a different type of disability such as cerebral palsy. At any rate, a VR counselor would work with this student to develop not only the IEP, but also an IPE, or Individualized Plan of Employment. In this case they work in concert until the student is either

"Our emphasis is on school and work, of course, and to find alternatives to one of our young people just going home and staying there."

in post-secondary education or has gone directly into employment."

Vocational Rehab has agreements with local educational agencies to blend funds for school-based job coaches. There are approximately 100 of these coaches active in Alabama, with VR paying half the cost and

Linda Hames *believes in young people*



"I am fortunate in that I love my work, and this is because I love working with young people."

These are the words of Linda Hames, State Transition Coordinator for Vocational Rehabilitation Service, a division of the State of Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services.

"I grew up in Hueytown, Alabama, and went to Birmingham Southern and UAB," she said. "When I graduated I became a Special Ed teacher. My first job was right there in Birmingham, at the Center for Developmental Learning Disorders, which later became the Sparks Clinic. Dr. Carol Dowdy was a major influence for me there, but I felt called to work with students in the classroom so I was able to do that in Birmingham and Jefferson County."

Hames's teaching career was interrupted when Dr. Dowdy received a grant to work with students with learning disabilities. Hames's experience made her a

natural to become the grant coordinator, and she welcomed the challenge. She came from that job to her present position and has been State Transition Coordinator ever since.

"I absolutely love it here," she said. "Our youth have a lot to say. Unfortunately, they are not listened to as much as they should be, and we must include youth in the decisions that are being made on their behalf. It's necessary to hear our young people because they have unique and valuable information that we can get only from them."

Hames, through her work with YLF and other avenues, seeks to find ways to give young people more input into policy decisions.

"If young people are effective self-advocates, professionals would really become facilitators instead of also being the lone decision-makers as well," she said.

"We want our young people to shape their own futures instead of just letting it happen to them. The key to transition is that our young people have ownership of what happens to them."

Transition

Continued



In FY 2007, a total of **17,353 students** in Alabama schools were transition students. Of those students, **2,763 became employed** in a stable job situation. That does not mean the rest were chronically unemployed. Many

of those remaining were still in high school or exited into post-secondary training. About one-third of all Vocational Rehab cases in Alabama come from public school transition students in any given year. The national average is about one in four.

Besides some of the "traditional" disabilities mentioned above, VR in Alabama is placing a new emphasis on students with autism. Hames said all students, including those with multiple needs, deserve and require good assessments.

"Lakeshore in Birmingham is developing a model functional assessment that is individualized for some students who previously would have been considered unable to work," Hames said. "Our goal is to enable these students to come out

from places they've had to go in the past and come instead into the community to work. We're starting to be able to reach out to more people, which is something we've been wanting and needing to do. So that's a good move forward."

Hames said in addition to school inclusion, VR is committed to youth development and empowerment. A goal of Hames's office is to see these young people become leaders. To this end, she has helped develop a program entitled Youth Leadership Forum (*see related sidebar on the Forum*).

"Alabama is a leader in transition," Hames said. "We have been recognized by the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration as one of three states to study in order to determine best practices. We are proud of the recognition, but want mostly to focus on serving our young people. The success of these students is what really determines how we are doing."

Real work, real pay, real lives!

By Teresa Grossi



Individuals with disabilities want a life - a real, meaningful life. They want what we all want, a good job, a good place to live, and places to go to have fun, surrounded by family and friends. Families want their loved ones to be happy and safe. Government agencies want cost-effective and cost-efficient services. Employers want to hire good, reliable workers while looking at the financial bottom line. So how does everyone win?

It's been over two decades since the concept of supported employment emerged and best practices evolved. Supported employment services are typically for those individuals who will need ongoing follow-along support such as individuals with all levels of intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, serious mental illness, autism, significant physical disabilities, and other developmental disabilities. **Supported employment typically refers to individual jobs in integrated settings where most people do not have disabilities, earning at or above commensurate wages as those in similar positions.** Essential elements for quality employment outcomes typically include person-centered career planning, job creation and restructuring, systematic instruction, coworker support, workplace accommodations and supports, assistive technology, self-management strategies and supported entrepreneurship.

So why are we not seeing the outcomes and people served as initially intended?

We know that supported employment continues to grow at a slow, steady pace. From 1993 to 2002, the number of individuals placed in community jobs increased from approximately 72,000 to 118,000 (Braddock, Rizzolo, & Hemp, 2004). Many authors believe that supported employment programs still need to serve individuals with more significant disabilities and who supported employment originated to serve (e.g., Mank, 1994; Wehman & Kregal, 1995; Rusch & Braddock, 2005). For instance, a study following 291 individuals with disabilities from 40 sheltered workshops from across the country who entered competitive employment, specifically supported employment, showed a significant increase in wages and integration (Rogan, Grossi, Mank, Haynes, Thomas, & Majd, 2002). When the participants were in a sheltered workshop, their average hourly earnings were \$2.30, or average monthly earnings of \$175.69. When these same individuals moved out of the sheltered workshop and into a competitive job, their average hourly earnings increased to \$5.75; with average monthly earnings of \$455.97. In 2006, a survey conducted by the Indiana Resource Center on Autism showed that 61% (815) of people with autism over the age of 18 were unemployed; 14% worked in a sheltered workshop and 25% worked in community jobs. Those who worked were employed on an average of 21 hours per week with a median annual income of \$6,516.

This data supports other state data where 32% of individuals with developmental disabilities spend the majority of their day in a sheltered workshop earning an average of \$1.74 per hour compared to 28% of individuals with developmental disabilities who spend the majority of their day in a competitive job earning an average of \$6.74 per hour (Grossi & Mank, 2006).

So as supported employment grows, so do segregated and non-work services. Winsor and Butterworth (2007) found that in fiscal year 2004, 22% of individuals receiving day supports from state mental

retardation or developmental disability (MR/DD) agencies participated in integrated employment while 57% of individuals were supported in facility-based settings. The percentage of individuals participating in non-work services, (defined as non job-related supports focusing on community involvement and typically identified as community integration or community participation services) has steadily increased, growing from 14.5% in 1999 to 21% in 2004.

Supported employment services provide workers with disabilities greater monetary outcomes compared to segregated options like a sheltered workshop and adult day programs. Studies have shown how supported employment programs are good investments for taxpayers and society in general. For every \$1.00 invested into supported employment, far more is returned to taxpayers in the form of taxes, reduction of alternative programs and decreases in governmental subsidies (Braddock, Rizzolo, & Hemp, 2004). The per capita federal cost in 2002 of supported employment is still less than facility-based options (\$915.25 versus \$1,010.35). Yet, facility-based settings continue to make up the majority of expenditures for day and employment services. Nationally, facility-based work and facility-based non-work services received 57% of the funding for day and employment services, while integrated employment received 12% of the funding in FY2004. These data indicate that the system of funding day and employment services for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities still favors facility-based service options (Winsor & Butterworth, 2007).

What Do People With Disabilities and Their Families Say About Community Jobs?

In a recent survey with people with disabilities who are in a sheltered workshop and their families/guardians, 74% (N = 203) of adults with intellectual disabilities and 67% of their families (N= 181) would have preferred employment outside the sheltered workshop, or at least consider the op-

tion (Migliore, Mank, Grossi, Rogan, 2007). Interestingly, the preference of adults with intellectual disabilities and their families was not associated with the severity of disability. We must understand what families believe influences their choice in favor of sheltered workshops vs community employment. The top factors include transportation (69%), long-term placement (66%), safety (69%) work hours (59%), disability benefits (57%) and social environment (55%). When asked if anyone encouraged the adult with disability to seek employment outside the sheltered workshop, 40% of families and 46% of adults with disabilities reported that nobody had encouraged them or that they did not know if anybody had done so (Migliore, Grossi, Mank, & Rogan, in press).

What Do We Need To Do?

Show people with disabilities and their families the possibilities. For many individuals and their families, having a good job or their own home seems impossible. We as a system of service delivery must continue to help families dream, show them the possibilities, and help them design a meaningful life.

Listen to people with disabilities and their families. We must encourage self-advocates and their families to speak out and be involved in their own services. We need to make sure we are giving "equal" choices to families and address their concerns about community employment. For example, transportation and long-term placement continues to be an ongoing concern. How are we addressing the safety nets for families? If an individual is working 20 hours a week, what is the individual doing the remainder of the week? How are we supporting families who may need some respite during the day?

We must pay for what we want. If we want to see more individuals with disabilities choosing competitive employment, then we must ensure that the funding is there to support them. With the old adage "we get what we pay for," we must invest in the outcomes we want - wages, hours, integration, quality lives.

Students with disabilities must transition from school to employment. Recent changes in IDEA show that schools must

do a better job preparing students for competitive employment, including supported employment. This will require teaching students self-determination skills, improving work experiences during high school, leaving school with a job, and cultivating collaboration and cooperation with adult service providers.

Learn from other states with higher employment outcomes and employment first policies. States such as Connecticut, Washington, and Oklahoma reported percentages as high as 51%, 55% and 71% respectively (Braddock, et al., 2005). Vermont recently closed its last sheltered workshop and moved people to community employment and supports (Dague, Masterson, & Sulewski, 2007). The state of Washington's Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) issued a new policy which went into full effect on July 1, 2006. This policy "designates employment supports as the primary method of furnishing state-financed day services to adult participants." Emphasizing community employment as the primary service option, the policy states that: "services for persons under the age of 62 that do not emphasize the pursuit or maintenance of employment in integrated settings can be authorized only by exception to policy" (WA DSHS, DDD, "County Services for Working Age Adults" Policy 4.11). This policy does not eliminate sheltered employment or community access services; rather, it focuses supports towards gainful employment.

Improve the competencies of those providing the services. Through the years of wide spread implementation of supported employment, it has become obvious that a key element for success is

well-trained, value-based employment specialists (job coaches). Individuals in these roles must have the value and belief that people with varying levels of disabilities can and should work. They are the heart and soul of program implementation (see www.apse.org for employment specialist competencies).

Work closely with employers. We have learned a great deal about partnering with businesses. More and more employers are beginning to understand the value of diversifying their workplace and the potential contribution of individuals with disabilities, including developmental disabilities. One employer once said "hiring people with disabilities is just good business sense."

If we look back over 20 years or so, we have seen possibilities turn into realities for people with developmental disabilities, of all levels, by working and contributing to their community, living in their own home with supports, and being a part of their own community.

We must continue to improve our service delivery and give individuals with disabilities and their families the hope that the possibilities will be their own reality by investing in funding priorities that support state and federal policies that emphasize integration and employment outcomes; investing in secondary transition services; investing in self-advocacy and self-determination; and investing in entities that promote innovative thinking and approaches to enhance quality outcomes for individuals.

Teresa Grossi, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center on Community Living and Careers, Indiana Institute On Disability and Community, at Indiana University





“A wave
is on
the way”

Simpson, Autism Center seek to help counselors gain autism transition experience

When Dr. Robert Simpson considers “transition” he sees a mere thread, but also envisions a bridge across a chasm between school and Vocational Rehabilitation. That’s because Simpson, Professor of Rehabilitation and Special Education at Auburn Univer-

“We have an excellent relationship with the outstanding professionals in the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation and we want to continue to develop a close working relationship with Vocational Rehabilitation counselors around the state,” Simpson said. “They do great work; but, traditionally

er, that number is up to one in every 150 births. In Alabama alone, there were 1,319 students with autism (ages 6 - 21) in the public school system in 2003-2004. That is up from just 69 identified

students in 1993, an increase of 1,840 percent. The national rate of increase is also over 1,000 percent, going from just over 12,000 students in 1993 to nearly 150,000 ten years later. Dr. Simpson knows that these numbers are hard to comprehend, but that we must nevertheless prepare for this swelling tide of young people who will need transitional services.

Dr. Jennifer Sellers, Assistant Director of the Auburn University Autism Center, collaborated with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation to examine employment rates for adults with autism in Alabama.

“Of all clients with autism who have gone through Vocational Rehabilitation Services in Alabama so far, only four percent have gained employment,” Sellers said.

“That means that 96 percent of those individuals with autism who accessed the system were never employed. We know that with the increasing number of people

they have dealt with disabilities other than autism. Most agencies that serve adults are not prepared to deal with clients who have autism because it is such a unique disability and, until recent years, it has been extremely rare.”

In 1992, autism appeared in about one in every 10,000 births. Less than 15 years lat-

approaching employment age, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors will need much more training concerning the characteristics, support needs and skills of clients with autism, and we would like to help provide that training.”

Simpson is quick to add that the small percentage of clients with autism who are employed in Alabama does not indicate negligence on the part of Vocational Rehabilitation Services or any other agencies focusing on transition in Alabama.

“Autism has been described by many professionals as an ‘epidemic’ and, just a few years ago, the increasing numbers of school-age children with autism entered the public educational system like a tidal wave,” said Simpson.

In general, public schools were not prepared to meet the specialized needs of children with autism, and school leaders continue to provide additional training for teachers.

“Those children are growing up and agencies focusing on transition now face the same need for preparation and training of personnel to meet the vocational needs of adolescents and young adults with autism,” Simpson added.

Costs are staggering

“Autism is our country’s fastest-growing developmental disability. Besides the human capital in terms of what these individuals can offer our society, we must also consider the financial costs of doing nothing,” Simpson said. “If we are unable to train our young people with autism to enter the workplace, they will become totally dependent on society. The time will come when their parents will no longer be able to care for them, and they will be too old for the public school system. Vocational training and employment are clearly part of the human solution, as well as the financial solution.”

The Autism Society of America estimates that the national cost of caring for citizens with autism who are totally dependent and have not received vocational training leading to eventual employment will soon exceed \$100 billion, and that number could double or quadruple in ten years.

“We simply cannot afford that,” said Simpson. “We must act now.”

Autism Center Assistant Director Jennifer Sellers has been in regular communication with Vocational Rehabilitation Services about providing training for Alabama’s VR counselors.

The purpose of the proposed training would be to provide knowledge to every VR counselor in the state concerning the characteristics, needed supports and positive work attributes of people with autism.

“Adults with autism tend to be excellent employees,” said Dr. Sellers. “They are usually steady workers who are dependable, loyal, and miss very few work days.”

Simpson said a practicum site is in the works at Auburn.

“In the near future, we plan to develop a Master’s level practicum site here at the Autism Center for students who are training to enter the field of Vocational Rehabilitation. As they graduate, they will enter the profession with expertise concerning autism and job training. The timing is perfect to address the needs of consumers with autism who are about to reach transition age.”

Simpson summarized his overall vision for the future.

“Our goal is simple: we want individuals with autism to enjoy a fulfilling life and to become as independent as possible. We also want to have a part in helping them become citizens who are tax payers instead of tax consumers. If the Auburn University Autism Center provides the needed training to Vocational Rehabilitation professionals, the professionals will then be better equipped to match successfully the skills of individuals with autism to the requirements of available jobs. This is truly a scenario in which everybody wins!”

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Auburn University Autism Center starts transition program

When the Auburn University Autism Center announced that it was accepting public school students from the surrounding area into its new autism transition program, the Center staff believed that they would be inundated with applications and would have a difficult time finding spaces for all the students. For a variety of reasons, that did not happen this year and the Center has begun its pilot program with several unfilled spaces. As a result, the program is opening up its services to students from around the state and is now accepting applications.

"We will accept into our transition program any student whose primary diagnosis is autism, regardless of his or her level of severity or potential for being employed," said Dr. Robert Simpson, Director of the

Auburn University Autism Center. "Our goal for every student is independent employment. We are not naive about the challenges involved in achieving totally independent employment; but, we do not establish ceilings for our clients. We believe in the clients and let them set their own ceilings. Our purpose is to help them achieve the highest level of independence they can and, since our center is a demonstration site, we welcome visits from others who might want to observe the methods we use to help our clients achieve their goals."

Dr. Jennifer Sellers, Assistant Director of the Auburn University Autism Center,

explained that the Center staff follow a procedure in which they attempt to match the strengths and support needs of an individual with autism to the requirements of a particular job. The staff and the clients explore job possibilities together in an effort to match clients with job sites that offer good potential for a successful placement.

"We emphasize two kinds of training," Sellers explained. "We focus first on job-specific skills such as production, measurement, assembly, use of tools, and cleaning. We match the vocational training to the

interests and abilities of the client; but, we also emphasize social skills."

Dr. Simpson pointed out that "workers with autism tend to lose their jobs not because of inability to perform the work, but often because of social reasons. Successful employment requires good workers, but also requires workers who can conform to the

social expectations of the workplace culture. For that reason, we emphasize both vocational and social skills."

Dr. Sellers clarified this point.

"For example, staff from the Autism Center might investigate what is considered appropriate attire and personal hygiene, as well as behavior during work breaks, lunch and down time at a potential job site. We will then try to teach the client what behavior is socially acceptable and what behavior is socially unacceptable in the workplace in



Dr. Jennifer Sellers, Assistant Director of the Auburn University Autism Center



Life skills: A fully stocked kitchen is displayed in the Autism Center to help students develop domestic skills

an effort to help the client avoid alienating his or her fellow workers. Additionally, we want to help clients deal with the frustration they might experience when unexpected changes occur in the workplace. The goal is to both do the job and to fit in with the other workers."

Dr. Sellers emphasized that communication is a key to succeeding in the workplace and that many people with autism communicate best visually.

"Being non-verbal is not the same as being non-communicative," she said. "People with autism often experience difficulty in comprehending spoken language; so in our transition program we use a lot of visual symbols. For example, in the workplace we might have symbols of specific tasks arranged in the order in which they are to be completed. This is comparable to the way in which many of us refer to a personal calendar to remind us of things we are scheduled to do and the order in which they are to be done. So, we all use symbols, in one way or another, to help us keep track of things."

In addition to vocational work space, the transition area at the Auburn University Autism Center is equipped with a working



Heather Gragg works closely with every client who enters the program.

kitchen and laundry room. The kitchen is stocked with food items and appliances. Grocery shopping, simple food preparation, maintenance and cleaning skills are incorporated into the transition training. Program staff provide practical, "hands on" opportunities for transition clients to develop skills needed in the working world, as well as skills needed for independence in domestic daily life.

The Auburn University Autism Center transition program is capable of handling up to ten clients at a time. The current Master's level transition teacher is Heather Gragg, who works very closely with every client who enters the program.

"When we hear that people with autism cannot work," concluded Dr. Sellers, "we just say, 'come see us.'"



Funding a continuous challenge for the Auburn University Autism Center

Public school students who enroll in the Auburn University Autism Center Transition Program can have their school funds transferred from their local school to the Autism Center; so, there are no extra costs involved for the client or his family. The Autism Center itself, which is also a demonstration and training site for pre-school children with autism, is in the final year of receiving funds from the Alabama State Department of Education. The Center also receives partial funding from Auburn City Schools, private donations from individuals and legislative appropriations through Auburn University. In spite of its unique mission and the pressing need for its services, both now and in the future, the Center does not have a guaranteed steady funding source from year to year.

"We are always looking for ways to increase funding for our work," Simpson said. "Our transition program will be particularly costly because of the one-to-one supervision needed by most of our clients. We are always seeking grant support, private donations and funding from agencies that recognize the importance and need of what we are trying to do for our clients, their families and, from an economic perspective, our nation. We get great manpower support from undergraduate and Master's students who work at the Autism Center; but, funding remains a constant concern for our work."

To learn more about the Auburn University Autism Center, or its transition program, call (334) 844-2004 or visit the Center's website at: <http://www.auburn.edu/academic/education/rse/autismcenter/>

Life skills: Sweeping instructions are taped to the floor in Auburn University Autism Center





Cerebral palsy
JUST PART
of a rich life

Clint Usher works his way though life, career

"I'm just trying to do my job. I want to be employable and productive, and supportive of my family and our country. These are not impossible statements of mission, but they aren't heard as often as they should be from people with disabilities. I hope that by being 'out there' I am helping to change that perception."

James D. Clinton Usher, better known as Clint to his many friends, family members and clients, is a Financial Advisor at Merrill Lynch in Montgomery, Alabama. He is a husband and a father, a lay leader in his church, and the public address announcer for a local high school football team. Clint Usher also has cerebral palsy. "I grew up in a pretty blue-collar environment in Birmingham," Usher said. "My father, and his father and grandfather for that matter, were electricians with very close ties to the International Brotherhood of Electrical

Workers. They were union men through and through, basically doing what had to be done to keep the machines running at U.S. Steel." Aside from an aunt who had severe cognitive impairment, Usher's family had little to no experience with disabilities. "I was diagnosed when I was three or four years old," Usher said. "Since it was not a severe case, the doctors said I wouldn't need to be in special education so I just went through the regular public school curriculum and graduated from Minor High School." Usher said for him the effects of cerebral palsy were and are more social than physical. He had fewer PE classes in school, for example, but tried to fit in with his peers in most other ways.

"Let's just say I wasn't the star quarterback for the Minor High School Tigers. But I was the team's statistician." "Cerebral palsy is a static brain damaged condition, meaning that it does not have a tendency to get worse and worse, nor is it genetically transmitted," Usher said. "No two cases of CP are identical. My case is called spastic diplegia. This means that my cerebral cortex scrambles the signals to my lower extremities. Some CP cases include severe cortical impairments. Mine doesn't. If I'm sitting here talking to you, you really can't tell much is wrong with me. But if I try to stand up it is pretty obvious that something is different." Usher's parents acknowledged that their son had physical limitations, but still encouraged him to do as much as he could. He described his parents as loving and trusting, and said he did very little to betray that trust. "They were my great support network," he said. "We have always had a great relationship, and my disability was never the focus of that relationship. It was just who I was. When I was growing up we didn't live in a bubble. We just went about regular lives as a family." Usher said the social ramifications of his disability are still more relevant than the physical aspects. "Dealing with the social perceptions of a disability are more difficult than anything else," he said. "People with disabilities want to do all the things people without disabilities want to do. We want to drive a car or fly a plane or make a bungee jump. It just depends on the person. But I also have to put myself in the other person's shoes. If I want to ask a girl on a date I have to know she will have questions. 'Does he drive? What can he do and not do? What would it be like to kiss someone with a disability?' These are very fair questions that you must know people are going to ask themselves." Usher made his way through the school system very well, and made several close friends along the way. He went on to start college at UAB where he hoped to become a physician and treat people with neurological conditions. "But I couldn't do that," he said. "I just did not have the physical stamina and endur-

ance it takes to be a physician. That's an issue for me and always will be." Based on this realization, Usher transferred to Samford where he majored in Public Administration and in 1994 became the first member of his family to graduate from college. He took a job with a speakers bureau, gaining lots of experience as a motivational speaker with an emphasis on patriotism, overcoming adversity, and anti-drug messages. Usher has spoken at Boys State for eighteen years in a row, has spoken at the national ADA convention, and figures he has addressed upwards of one million people in engagements all over the country.

Clint
"I've been laughed at and called names, but I get up and move on," he said. "Physical obstacles impede my progress but I move on. This has been my life and will continue to be. I can't keep asking God 'Why me?' That's not important for me to know. God made me as part of his overall plan. Where do I fit in? I'm not sure. I have a couple of hundred clients who depend on me for their financial future. I have a wife and daughter who depend on me. I have a family and friends who love me. Maybe that's where I fit in."

After a few years of that he transitioned into teaching history, political science and economics at Calvary Christian Academy in Montgomery, where he was subsequently drafted to be the public address voice for the football team. "In my first few weeks at Calvary I was recruited by a Wall Street firm, Dean Witter, to come work for them. I chose to honor my



year-long contract with Calvary, however, and waited until the end of the school year to begin my work as a Financial Advisor. I was recruited from Dean Witter by Merrill Lynch and have been there ever since." Usher said he never asked for accommodations at either firm, nor was he ever offered accommodations. It was handled more directly than that. "How else can I put it?" he asked. "I fall down a lot. I had to explain that to my colleagues. I just told them they would see some things. If I go down and drop everything it's no big deal. I just tell them: 'If Clint gets up and goes on, it's all OK.' Dealing with clients, that's another matter." Usher said fairly few Wall Street firms have Financial Advisors with cerebral palsy in particular or disabilities in general. "Clients have very little experience with financial planning to start with," he said. "They have even less experience with people with disabilities. So we have some unique situations when I meet new clients. Referrals of course are very helpful as clients might be more prepared to work with me. Social venues are also nice. But sometimes walking through large corporate headquarters is not as easy. I was once with a group in a large corporate setting and I fell down in the lobby. There was some uneasiness on their part. Some discomfort. They were probably thinking of liability issues and just weren't ready for that. But that's OK. I deal with it every day." Usher obviously worked his way through the complex social milieu, as he is now married and the father of a newborn baby daughter.

Continued on last page

James Watkins *moves from residential facility to his own residence*



House (Glenwood's supported apartment program). They helped me learn to live on my own. I cooked a lot. I did a lot of chores. I learned to make salads, cook pasta and wings, clean up after myself. A lot of household chores and cooking. I also lived at Parkland which is more like a group home. I cooked a lot there, too."

James is generally all business in conversation and likes to stick to the facts.

"Now I live in a townhouse on my own," he said. "It's called Danita. I have lived there for three years, in totally independent living."

Meanwhile, James has been on the job at Protective Life since 1989.

"I do machine work to get the mail out," James said. "I do quality control and check mail to make sure it has postage and the right address in the window. I also hand stuff mail runs that are not automated or are too small for the machine."

James is one of Protective Life's 1400 employees. His immediate supervisor, Alvin Johnson, said James has shown great improvement since starting at Protective Life, and has matured into a dedicated and hard-working employee.

"I'm having success in my life because I do a good job here," James said. "Alice Faye Miller, my teacher at Allan Cott School, helped me get the job here. I like it here. We work as a team but we have several individual jobs. It's hard work here. You have to be steady and have determination. A lot of the guys here kid with me because I like

to just work except when I take my break or eat my lunch."

James said he brings nutritious lunches from home every day, as he was taught at Glenwood about good nutrition.

"When I'm at home and not at work I like sports and I like to read and to do my chores. I like Kurt Vonnegut and especially Agatha Christie mysteries. She wrote over 100 and I've read them all. My favorite is *Murder on the Orient Express*."

James also likes sports books, and has several favorite athletes, including SEC quarterbacks past and present, including Ken Stabler and JeMarcus Russell. He also remembers the scores (and most plays) of every Iron Bowl, including scores of games that were played before he was born. Asked to name his favorite Crimson Tide and Auburn Tiger victories, James quickly clicked off the scores and highlights from Tide victories in 1985 and 1992, and Auburn wins in 1969, 1970, and 1986.

He is an ardent Democrat and believes America's greatest president was FDR. He feels Barack Obama is a strong candidate in this election. His favorite musician is Mozart.

Being around James in his work environment for even an hour, it is clear to see he is a well-loved part of the employee team and that he works steadily in spite of his colleagues' deliberate attempts to joke with him and distract him. He obviously has a special relationship with his longtime mentor and supervisor John Woods. But it's also clear that maybe James isn't always as serious as he lets on.

"He and I get along fine," James said. "We get along best when he's not around."

For the past 18 years, James Watkins has worked full-time in the hectic mailroom environment of Protective Life, a national life insurance company headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. There's nothing remarkable about this except for one thing: James has a diagnosis of autism, and worked his way into the job and his own independence from a carefully-controlled residential environment where he was receiving 24-7 support.

James was born in Bessemer in 1968, and was sent to the campus of Glenwood, a Birmingham school and residential treatment facility for young people and adults with developmental disabilities, when he was just 14 years old.

"At Glenwood I went to the Allan Cott School and got a good education," James said. "In 1988 I got to move to Ireland



"I've known James since he was just 14"

Glenwood's Joe Carter watched Watkins grow up

In his 28 years at Glenwood, a Birmingham school and residential treatment facility for young people and adults with developmental disabilities, Joe Carter has met a lot of people. One of the most memorable of those people is James Watkins.

"I have known James since he was just 14 years old because he came into our residential program with an autism diagnosis. That was in 1982," said

Carter, who serves Glenwood as vice president of adult services.

"James had some significant limitations which is why he came here. He would ask very awkward, overly-personal questions. He had a hard time negotiating free time. But he also had a remarkable talent with numbers and memory. He made an impact here, no doubt about that."

Glenwood's Joe Carter

Noting James's great progress over the years, one of the Glenwood staffers who had a relationship with Protective Life Insurance Company got James an interview there. He got the job and has been there ever since.

"It was just a case of finding a position that matched James's talent," Carter said. "If you had told me back then that he would now be living on his own with 18 years of successful full-time employment, I wouldn't have believed you. It's too easy to overlook the abilities and potential of people with autism."

Carter said a lot of the credit must go to James's on-the-job mentor and supervisor, John Woods.

"John is a big part of James's success. He has been with James all along. John just had an interest and agreed to help support James at work. He didn't have any prior experience in anything like that but it worked out to be a great situation, I think, for both James and John. John will call me and tell me that James has had a cough. He really

takes a deep and abiding interest in James's well-being."

Glenwood, which is profiled in the Vol. I No. 3 issue of the *ACDD Advocate*, continues to provide in-home support for James.

"James was in our apartment program until three years ago when he moved into his own apartment," Carter said. "Like a lot of people with autism, James likes things to be specific and ordered and not generalized and vague. To him, in a new place, no rules and nothing from the old place still applied. We were spending probably 40 hours a week helping him adjust to new rules and routines but that's down now to probably ten hours a week. We help him with his transportation and groceries and doctors appointments but that's about it."

"I can't impress upon you what a huge step that was, going from long-term residential placement with 24-hour supervised care to moving out on his own. What an accomplishment. It's just great. He comes to dinner a couple of times a week at our apartment program so we still see him but

he is independent. James is a real success story."

Carter said in addition to his independence, James has begun negotiating his way in the larger world.

"James has always been real concrete – not really into any abstractions," Carter said. "If you asked James 'How are you doing?' he responded with a memorized answer. He's always been like that. But what he has done that's amazing to me, for example, is that he will dress differently in different situations because he realizes that's what you do. When he moved into a community home we asked him to call us on the beeper after an hour. One day he didn't call. We found out he had ridden the bus to Birmingham Southern. To go there James dressed in blue jeans and a blue sweater so he would look like a college student."

"For someone who came to us like James did, to see him combining independence with abstractions, well, it's just a great thing to see. It makes what we do all worthwhile."

Supported employment and a special relationship

John Woods is more than a supervisor



how he would handle a job in our mailroom," said Woods. "It's an intense environment much of the time, and much of the work is repetitious. We have over one million customers and we've got to keep the information flowing."

At first, Woods said, it was "trial and error" with James.

"When he started he needed a job coach every day and was having a hard time. Glenwood sent a job coach at first but once he had

the location and the job routine down he came on his own. Now he lives on his own. He's come a long way."

Woods said he had no experience working with people with disabilities, or working as a job coach.

"I had never had an experience like that," Woods said. "But once I got to know James I saw that all he needed was some love.

And he has his own way. If you were talking in his presence and didn't include him

he would start reciting football statistics or something like that. And he knows his statistics by the way. I think he does that to let us know he is there and that he is aware. You've got to include him."

According to Woods, James is a huge sports fan and he's good with numbers and dates of birth.

"You can tell him your birth date and he will tell you what day of the week you were born on. He has an ability with numbers. To see him in action is really something. I believe he also knows every zip code for every street in Alabama.

As far as school loyalty goes, Woods said James doesn't seem to take sides.

"To me he is neither an Auburn nor an Alabama fan. He just likes football. He goes with who you are."

"I truly believe James is one of those guys who have come a long way, but would have done it earlier if he had had more love and attention when he was young. I mean,

Continued on last page



Auburn's **TRANSITION** Leadership Institute

provides research, serves teachers

"There will always be a need for transition to improve, and a need to train new people to deliver effective transition services" said Dr. Karen Rabren, Director of the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute at Auburn University. "Changes occur constantly—whether they are internal changes within programs or external. Internally within programs, people retire, they change jobs, they move away, and so on. External changes also have an impact. Legisla-

developmental disabilities, we must start working with them even earlier. Students cannot remain in public school past age 21, so we try to make sure parents are aware of adult agency services. And, that they get on lists, if necessary, for things such as independent living."

The Alabama Transition Conference, which the Institute hosts, is in its 18th year. It has benefitted from grants awarded by the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities. In the late 1990s the ACDD provided scholarships

"The original generation of people who were trained in transition are getting older so we are here to train teachers who work with students with disabilities."

tion and policy continues to change and evolve and professionals must respond in their actions and practices."

We are here to offer training in the theory, principles and goals of transition for teachers and rehabilitation counselors who work with students with disabilities as they make their transition from being an adolescent to a young adult. In that and other important ways our Transition Leadership Institute is well-aligned with Auburn's mission of instruction, research and outreach. We really combine all three."

Transition is generally defined as helping students with disabilities transition between school and the workplace, usually involving students age 16-21, and younger as appropriate.

"In terms of instruction, we train special education teachers and rehabilitation counselors to work with transition age students," Rabren said. "For students with significant

for parents to attend its annual conference. Rabren said such early support has helped the state conference grow to the point where registration fees have been waived for the last several years for parents and students in transition programs.

"Our biggest event every year is our Transition Conference," Rabren said. "It is the second oldest such conference in the United States, and we have had many high-profile keynoters, including three different Assistant Secretaries of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. We have about 700 people at our conference each year."

Rabren said the annual conference, plus recent training sessions for teachers, counselors and administrators from across the Southeast, helps the Institute fulfill its outreach and service role.

"In terms of research, we have for the past 12 years evaluated post-school outcome data for students with disabilities," Rabren said. "One significant finding from this research is that if a student had a job just before leaving school, there is an 87 percent chance of that student still being employed a year later. So we see that getting an early start to employment is critical for a successful transition."

Rabren said the Institute also develops software for other states that tracks post-school outcomes.

"Without results and data on the outcomes of the former students we serve, how can we know how well our programs are preparing our students for their futures? So that kind of research is something else we do that could have a broad-based impact on improving quality."

The importance of mentoring

Rabren added that it is critically important for students with disabilities to have a mentor.

"When students feel they are being supported by their school, it decreases the drop-out rate," she said. "Academics are a consistent problem for students with developmental disabilities, so if they have a good mentoring relationship, they remain emotionally attached to school in spite of academic problems. And this is very important. These mentors are usually teachers, and they can be parent volunteers, and we are even beginning to research the positive effects of peer mentoring. But we know that parent involvement is very important to transition programs."

Another challenge Rabren sees in the state is that many parents are reluctant for their child to get a job for fear of losing that child's Social Security. Rabren said we must explain that this will not necessarily occur. Parents need to understand the relationship between services, of any kind, and activities that lead to more self-sufficiency.

"And let's make clear that transition is for students with all disabilities, and not just developmental disabilities," Rabren said.

A need for options

"We need employment choices in Alabama including more supported employment options," Rabren said. "It just makes good economic sense, not to mention the quality of life that employment makes pos-

sible. Funding is always an issue, though. We must continue the efforts we've started in this regard. Until everyone is employed or engaged in activity that they find meaningful we are not done with our work in transition."

Rabren admits there are limitations on the kinds of work some people can do, but that we must focus on finding the right match and build on peoples' strengths.

"The idea is to evaluate the person as a whole, consider their strengths as well as their limits, and find that person the right job. There is something out there for everyone. The job markets are changing and we need to find those niches so everyone can be included to the maximum extent possible. We must prepare our young people before they leave high school."

"Look, for example, at the excellent classes being taught by Earnestine Giles in Tuscaloosa (*ACDD Advocate* Vol. 1, No. 4). Her students aren't necessarily learning algebra but they are enjoying a wonderful quality of life and learning valuable life skills. That to me is a very positive transition program, helping students see the connection between school and work. Earnestine is really an example of what this Transition Leadership Institute is all about: our hard-working, dedicated professionals. We are here to keep caring professionals like Earnestine and others energized and motivated."

Training in Transition

The Auburn Transition Leadership Institute recently conducted regional "best practices" transition workshops in Opelika, Huntsville, and Loxley for teachers and administrators throughout the state.

"This was more of a direct approach than what we typically do in the conference, so we are expanding in that part of our outreach mission," Rabren said.

"And in addition to our conference we sometimes have events like focus groups



that come to us and share what's out there. In this sense, the 'Ivory Tower' gets to hear from public school teachers and other direct service providers. From their input, we respond with research and training. But ultimately this kind of real time input leads us into new areas of research. So it works both ways and benefits both us and the transition professionals and more importantly, the students."

"That's of course our ultimate goal: to help the professionals help our students. It's what we're all about."

Academics are a consistent problem for students with developmental disabilities, so if they have a good mentoring relationship, they remain emotionally attached to school in spite of academic problems.

Outreach

special focus of Auburn's Transition Leadership Institute



Diane Glanzer is the Outreach Coordinator of the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute. While she acknowledges that the annual Alabama Transition Conference is the main thrust of the Institute's outreach and service efforts, there is much more than just that going on.

"Our conference is certainly a big draw in terms of outreach," she said. "We are in our 18th year and we had over 700 attendees last year. The conference attracts students and their families, secondary special ed and general ed teachers, rehabilitation counselors, MHMR agency personnel, job coaches and employer representatives. Even some teachers and counselors from neighboring states come every year. The Alabama State Department of Education's special education services (SES) and the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services support and encourage attendance among their transition personnel, and Dr. Mabrey Whetstone of SES and Commissioner Steve Shivers of ADRS do an "Alabama Transition Update" every year that concludes the conference. It's always well attended.

Glanzer said the Institute has put a special emphasis on in-service teacher training around the state.

"At different times of the year, we go, successively, to three regions in the state—north, central, south—and provide training that is free to participating teachers," she said. "Karen Rabren leads these efforts, along with Dan Roth from the State Department of Education. Over 300 teachers attended our last session and there were more who wanted to get in, had there been room. This is something the teachers really thirst for."

The series began with the basics of transition and will move on to increasingly complex topics.

"Another aspect of our outreach services is assisting local school systems with transition in various ways," Glanzer said. "A recent initiative, called Local Transition Partnerships, created three model programs for transition throughout the state, and was funded by a federal grant, which we helped put together. Brian Burrows ran the Auburn-Opelika program and created advocacy clubs for students with disabilities and provided a real presence in the business community. He led Community Transition Team meetings and presented awards to businesses and students who had established working partnerships together. We also had a very well received newsletter that, among other things, showcased the community members who offered work training and job shadowing to students."

Research

shows trends for institute's focus

In addition to training teachers and providing a variety of outreach projects, the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute also conducts research and evaluation. Led by Research Coordinator George Hall, the Institute collects and evaluates transition data for Auburn University, the State of Alabama, and for other states, as well.



"The Institute conducts research and evaluates perceptions of a range of transition stakeholders," Hall said. "While the views of transition professionals, such as school teachers and coordinators, rehabilitation counselors, and job coaches, are a continuing part of our research efforts, the focus is on the student consumers of transition programs and services."

Since 1996, Alabama's students with disabilities have answered survey questions about their transition program, while in high school, as well as their employment and education status, one year after exiting high school. This longitudinal research has led to a number of significant linkages between these students' high school transition programs and their successful exits and post-school employment.

Among these is the apparent importance of having a high school Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) program, which is an alternative curriculum, frequently used by students with developmental disabilities. Since the mid-1990s, the responses of participating students with disabilities indicate that as the number of participants in the AOD program increases, the overall number of drop outs reported decreases. This appears to continue, even as the AOD program has become increasingly academic. Because this finding is based on a limited number of Alabama's students with disabilities, it may not generalize to the entire population.

A second finding, based on a study of students with disabilities served by vocational rehabilitation, is that VR clients who are male, and who spent a lower number of hours outside the general education classroom in high school, were more likely to be closed to competitive employment.

A third finding regards the importance of job coaches to transition students finding such jobs during their high school vocational programs. While the evidence is largely anecdotal, due in part to the inconsistency in the ratio of transition students to job coaches across school systems, the presence of job coaches appears to increase the likelihood that students with disabilities will find employment while in high school.

"In addition to the direct benefit of better understanding the impact of high school transition programs on the exit and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities in Alabama, this research has also led to the development of commercially licensed software now available to help other states collect information about their transition students. As more states develop their own data collection and evaluation capabilities, we can develop a national understanding of how to better empower our students with developmental disabilities to become contributing members of society."

A Series on Alabama VISIONARIES

A mother who just won't quit, a son who keeps on working

Caroline Ball Matthews, known to her many faithful friends as "Dootsie," was one of four girls growing up in a prominent Montgomery family. She had no brothers. In 1948 Dootsie entered Alabama's law school at a time when there were very few women lawyers in the state. Following her graduation, she married John Matthews, a young Montgomery attorney who joined the Ball family firm.

"We started off with two beautiful daughters, Caroline and Jane," Dootsie recalled. "And then in 1955 we had a beautiful baby boy and named him John after his father. He was perfect and everyone was so happy. We felt like all our dreams had come true."

But as the months passed and John grew older, his parents noticed things about him that didn't seem right.

"He wouldn't make eye contact," Dootsie said. "If I picked him up he looked down. He seemed healthy and had good motor skills, but he also seemed cut off from the world. If we set him down he wouldn't crawl. If we spoke to him he wouldn't respond. We knew something was wrong but we didn't know what."

One day a fire engine roared past the family home and everyone but John jumped up. John didn't respond at all. His mother thought she had the answer: her son was deaf.

"My husband and I took little John on the train to a specialist at Tulane," Dootsie said.

"He was about 18 months old. The doctor there told us he wasn't deaf, but mentally retarded. It was a complete shock. We were in a terrible depression. We felt like dead people. When we took John back to a local pediatrician he just told us, 'Well, there's a rotten apple in every barrel.' He offered us no hope and I just can't tell you how alone and scared and helpless we felt."

That was the last time the Matthews family, which by 1963 included another son named Fred, ever felt that way. For the past fifty years they have worked together to

Montgomery. Dootsie remembers well her response to the attitude of those doctors.

"All she had to say was 'What in the hell are they talking about!?' She wrote to Johns Hopkins University where a Dr. Leo Kanner was the first physician to identify autism. We took John there and Dr. Kanner's assistant, Dr. Eisenberg, told us he felt that John had brain damage. 'Teach him to say "Yes Sir" and "No Ma'am." Maybe one day he will learn to tie his shoes.' That's what they told us. We felt knocked down again and came back home. No one seemed to know what

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help their beloved son and brother reach his full potential. Their family story, intertwined with John's own courage and determination, is one of love, perseverance, and optimism.

Sister put her foot down

Dootsie's sister-in-law was Dr. Jane Day, a well-known, outspoken, and completely unique internal medicine physician in

was wrong but something kept us going." Dootsie knew her son had strong brain function. She said he was interested in many things as long as they didn't involve people. He showed great skill making complex designs with Lego blocks, he loved to play with flashlights, and by the 1960s he had developed a real fascination with the NASA space program, eventually making complicated calculations about the speed



and location of the various spacecraft. Dootsie still has the drafts John made of flight trajectories.

"I had a friend who ran a kindergarten and John went there but all he did was play on the swing set and in the sandbox," Dootsie said. "He then went to the Montgomery Children's Center. It was a brand new school, and still operated out of a con-

versity and motor exercises. It was also called "crawling therapy."

"This therapy was devised by Drs. Doman and Delacato at their Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia," Dootsie said. "I called them up and said I could be there in 24 hours but was told there was a three-year waiting list. I kept calling and calling, saying if there was ever a cancellation to let me know and I could be there the next day. Finally, there was a cancellation, and we went right away. John was ten years old at the time."

At the Institute John's parents learned how to "pattern" which essentially meant placing him on a massage table and moving his limbs in a crawling pattern.

"Dr. Delacato really gave us hope for the first time and we came home inspired. We were determined to follow his instructions. We set up a table and we'd pattern John four times a day," Dootsie said. "Thanksgiv-

And then, for the first time ever, he began talking in sentences. All of a sudden he could express himself and he lost a lot of frustration right away."

Back to school

Mrs. Lillian Wilhelm, a teacher at nearby Cloverdale School, agreed at this time to teach John first and second grade. She had no special education training but just volunteered to do it. He completed those grades with her in a few months and was then enrolled as a special student at St. James School. Taught there by Bette Scott and others, John went through the third, fourth and fifth grades, focusing mostly on science and math.

"I remember St. James School," said John. "This is where I got really interested in the space program. But reading was hard for me and by the sixth grade they said I should go back to Children's Center's Occupational Training Unit."

John's toughest days were just ahead of him, and 1971 was a particularly difficult year.

"What I remember most about this time was that my grandmother died. We were so close. I used to spend the night at her house on Woodley Road and we'd bake cookies. My aunt Jane Day brought her casket back to Woodley Road before the funeral. It was closed, but I went up and looked at it. I knew she was dead. That's the first time I remember understanding mortality. After a while I had closed my eyes and didn't open them again for five months. I had a self-imposed blindness and only looked at things from then on through binoculars. They took me back to Johns Hopkins, I remember that. They asked me why I would only look through binoculars but I really didn't know why."

The Johns Hopkins psychiatrists wanted John to stay there for experiments since they had never seen anything like this before. Although the family lived comfortably with Mr. Matthews' income as an attorney, the Johns Hopkins price tag of several thousand dollars per week was beyond their means. John came back home with his parents.

ing Day. Christmas Day. It didn't matter. The other children would help me and all of my friends set up a rotation schedule and came over in turns to help. What would I have done without all those wonderful friends?"

The family made a "crawling track" around its living and dining rooms and motivated John to crawl. He had begun walking at age 14 months but had never crawled. The Doman-Delacato theory was that this patterning might take him back in his brain development and allow him to overcome whatever happened to him in infancy.

"One day John went into the correct cross-crawl pattern," she said. "He did it all by himself. I can tell you we all started crying. It was like an answer to our prayers.

Friends help again

John, now with his self-imposed blindness, spent long hours at home in a chair curled in the fetal position. One of Dootsie's friends, Francis Tullis, had an idea.

"Frances had no children but she had a lot of wisdom. She suggested we all take turns, like we had done with patterning, and sit with John and talk to him. We had nothing to lose and our friends were so kind to offer that we went ahead and tried it. They all had different ways. One friend, Hazel Mathis, would talk to John about her son Warner. Another friend would take John to see the interstate that was being built through Montgomery, which he seemed to enjoy viewing through his binoculars. We never really knew if he was listening or even hearing. Then, one day, as Hazel was leaving after a visit, she heard a voice behind her: 'Tell me more about Warner.' That was the beginning of the end of the blindness. I can tell you, again, pure love pulled John out of that state."

Once John was talking and using his eyes again he tried to go back to school. At Alabama Christian Academy he did well in math and science but he was also beginning a new worrisome and unusual behavior which the family called "re-tracing."

Dootsie recalled, "He became adamant about using the same route going and coming from any place he went. When I picked him up at school, I would have to wait while he walked around on different sidewalks, using the particular route that 're-traced' where he had been since I dropped him off that morning. The behavior was more and more obsessive."

So the family tried something else that had different but even worse consequences. A visiting psychiatrist from Scotland suggested the Eufaula Adjustment Center. This was at the same time when Alabama was de-institutionalizing Bryce and Partlow Hospitals. It turned out to be a behavior modification camp.

"I went there," John said. "My roommate, and other residents, got into trouble a lot. My roommate stole everything I had including my shoes and my watch. He made a plan for us to escape but I told him as bad as it was this place was a security blanket and I didn't want to escape."

John also showed his personal toughness when he fought off an attempt there by an older man to molest him.

"It was a bad place, a terrible failure," Dootsie said. "How we ever consented to that I'll never understand."

A visit back to Pennsylvania to see Dr. Doman had John trying a new program to help John normalize what the doctor called his "acute sensorisms." Doman now believed John's struggles were perhaps caused by sensory problems. The therapy didn't work, but later events would show Dr. Doman was on the right track in his ideas about heightened senses.

"At this point John was not doing well," Dootsie said. "He got more obsessive about re-tracing, and he began to impose it on family members. For example, if I picked up a pencil and put it down in a slightly different place, John would come over and pick it up and put it back in the exact place



"Parkland was a good place and the people there helped him become more self-sufficient," Dootsie said. "John's program focused on nutrition and Dr. Allan Cott's mega-vitamin therapy."

John, who seems to focus on the positive instead of the tough times he's been through, has good memories from this period.

"The AUM students told me I should take the GED and they would help me with anything I needed to pass it. I passed the science and math portions with a 97 percent. The reading part was harder, but I still passed it, even though I only had three years of formal education."

it had been before. After a while his father put his foot down and said we had to try something different."

John was sent to spend weekdays in Union Springs at a group home that was run by a strict but loving woman named Irene Masters (whome John still refers to as "Aunt Irene"). She helped John stop his re-tracing habits and become more independent and more comfortable away from home. Back in Montgomery, John trained at the Montgomery Rehabilitation Center, and then volunteered for a time at the Goodwill Center, but his sensitive ears were hurt by the jets at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base. At age 25 John went to Parkland Place, a residential facility run by the Glenwood Autism Behavioral and Health Center.

"What I remember most about this time was in 1983 I got a dog and named him Brother," John said. "Several students from Auburn University-Montgomery worked with me and we would watch movies on television. I really got into watching a soap opera, 'Days of our Lives,' and it's the only one I ever got into. I have been watching it for 24 years and I still watch it every day. On Fridays I watch it with Callie Roberts, who works with us at the house. Callie has known me since I was born."

"The AUM students told me I should take the GED and they would help me with anything I needed to pass it. I passed the science and math portions with a 97 percent. The reading part was harder, but I



In 2006 John experienced what he considers the biggest breakthrough of his adult life.

After Dootsie read in the *Autism Research Review International* about Dr. Melvin Kaplan's success helping people with autism with his methods of visual therapy, she and John hit the road again, this time for Tarrytown, New York to see Dr. Kaplan,

"I didn't ever make eye contact before that," John said. "I didn't see well or want to look at things. The doctor there worked on my eyes and had me do visual exercises which I still do twice a day at home. He then gave me yoked prism eyeglasses. These changed my life many times over. For 52 years I had dysfunction in my look. I never really knew I saw things distorted until I got the prism glasses. I think the distortion is what made me do all the things I did, like the blindness and the re-tracing. But now I can go anywhere and do anything. I can go to weddings and graduations, and can handle more responsibilities in my job at the library. This has really opened my life. I am like a new person."

The change, according to Dootsie, is indeed remarkable.

"When the glasses arrived he picked them up and ran out here into the living room," she said. "He put them on and announced to me, 'Now I'm going to look at my daddy's picture and *really* see his face!' It was a wonderful moment for us after all that work."

Looking back on their 50-plus years of working together to make John the best, most capable person he can be, Dootsie is still full of wonder.

"Listen. I was the worst prepared person in the world for this. I never could have imagined this life. I know I am fortunate to have been able to stay home and not work, thanks to my husband's workhorse style. And I've been fortunate to have so many wonderful friends who gave so much to me and to John, not to mention his siblings who have always been so full of love for their brother."

"All I can say in summary is to just go for it. Start early. Don't give up. Read and study and try everything you can. Be patient and keep trying."

Another trip to Chapel Hill was followed by a week-long visit by a life skills helper from Kansas who came to Montgomery to teach John more about hygiene and socialization. It was about this time that John started in as a book cataloger at the Huntingdon College Library in Montgomery, near his grandmother's old house on Woodley Road.

"They are like a family to me," John said of his library colleagues. "Eric Kidwell and everyone there helps me a lot, and Margaret Kinney is like another mother to me. This May will be 16 years since I started

still passed it, even though I only had three years of formal education."

In 1985, John and his parents flew to Los Angeles to see Dr. B.J. Freeman, a psychiatrist at UCLA who was the first to give John a hard autism diagnosis. John then went to Chapel Hill to participate in the TEACH program at the University of North Carolina which focused on occupational therapy. Following a drafting course at Patterson Technical College in Montgomery, John began cataloging books at the AUM Library but did not enjoy it. He felt like the tower in which the library was housed was some-

there. I have been steady there since 1992."

Although things have gone well in his library work, John and Dootsie never stopped trying new therapies or exploring anything that might help John continue to become more comfortable in society and grow as a person. In 2000, John visited Dr. Sidney Baker in Connecticut and got nutritional advice. Since that time he has been on a sugar- and wheat-free diet and has been much calmer. He has mostly stopped a longtime habit of constantly shaking his hands.

Meanwhile John's father had developed heart disease and had stopped traveling with Dootsie and his oldest son. He died in 2004.

what isolating. In 1991, John and Dootsie traveled to Montreal for audiotherapy to address John's extra-sensitive hearing.

"That was a very positive experience," John said. "That's what enabled me to go out into the world more. After that I could go out with the family to parties and restaurants and not worry about the noise. It really changed my life."

A French doctor in Montreal realized John was extremely sensitive to highs and lows in his hearing. He devised a way to filter sound frequencies through customized musical patterns and "level out" John's sensitivity.

A Series on
Legislative
PROFILES

Senator LARRY DIXON

Senator Larry Dixon of Montgomery learned early on that the world has all kinds of people. He took this lesson to heart in his boyhood Washington State hometown, and carried it with him across the country to Alabama.

"I grew up in the little town of Whitstrand, Washington," Dixon said. "My father worked for the Hanford Atomic Energy Commission and we had a little farm. Our cash crop was peppermint."

Dixon graduated from Prosser High School and recalls that several of his classmates had a specific disability.

"Jonas Salk didn't complete his research on the polio vaccine until 1952, so every one of my classes had someone with polio in it," he said. "Generally these cases left the person with a withered arm, or unable to walk, and many of those young people were just my friends and neighbors. I was with them every day. And even when the vaccine was available it didn't make those disabilities go away, so that was something I was aware of at an early age."

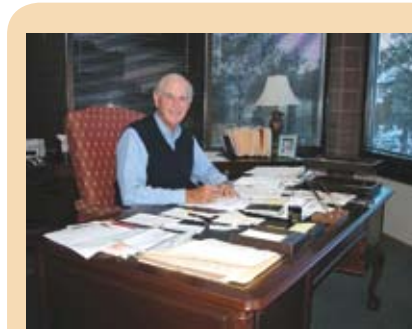
Following service in the Army's Third Infantry Division in Bamberg, Germany, Dixon returned home and earned two degrees at Washington State University. He met his future wife Gaynell at a ski resort in Idaho. She was serving as assistant dean of women at Washington State.

"She was from Piedmont, Alabama, and wanted to go back to home," he said. "I didn't know much about Alabama. Of course I was willing to go where she wanted to go, and so I did the only honorable thing I could do: I followed her here."

In Montgomery, Dixon went to work for the State Department of Education. In 1981 he became executive director of the Alabama Board of Medical Examiners and has been there ever since.

His political career began in 1975 when he was elected, along with legendary Alabama political figures Joe Reed and Emory Folmar, to Montgomery's first city council. He won a seat in the House of Representa-

tives in 1978, and in 1982 Dixon defeated an incumbent state senator. He has served in the Senate for 25 years.



"Here we have upstanding, hard-working people who just need a little hand up, and we have trouble making those precious resources available to help them," Dixon said. "Once those barriers are broken we have less of a problem because businesses see what good employees our people with disabilities are. Not only can they do the job, but they are elated to be there. Our citizens with disabilities genuinely appreciate things most of us too often take for granted."

"When I was in the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services was a division in our department," he said. "In fact, I handled the legislation that made Rehab Services its own freestanding department. It was that important to me, because I was there to see what they actually did and the clients they worked with every day."

Dixon said he ate lunch with those employees and clients every day in the Department's cafeteria in its Southern Boulevard location.

"I was particularly familiar with the Easter Seals work being done there and I still know the people in the Department. Most of them live in my district and they keep me informed of the issues that matter to them and their clients. I know how important it is to everyone there to be able to help clients go out and make a living."

Dixon said he feels employment training for people with disabilities is one of the most important functions of state government.

"We are very fortunate in Montgomery to have so much private business, and to have the Department and all its good work right here with us," he said. "But so many of these programs that are so visible to us are not as available in the smaller, more rural areas. Clients in these places should have the same opportunities as do people in the larger cities. If they want to go back to their home towns and work they should be able to. One of the things I want to see is having more outreach workers and supported employment in the smaller communities where so many of our people come from. The Department wants that, too, but they do not have the resources to make it happen."

Toward this end, Senator Dixon recently co-sponsored a bill that would promote better employment opportunities for citizens with disabilities. The bill did not pass but Dixon said he would continue to support and sponsor innovative legislation that would promote better employment opportunities for citizens with disabilities.

Dixon said the fiscal emphasis Alabama must place on Medicaid and Corrections

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Senator Larry Dixon

Continued from page 29

takes away valuable resources that could be put into employment programs for people with disabilities.

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"This has just been a natural calling for me," Dixon concluded. "It goes all the way back to my boyhood. I like trying to help people who need and deserve help. Many of our citizens with disabilities who are in the workforce have overcome devastating odds. We owe the same opportunity to all of our citizens."

Clint Usher

Continued from page 19

"My wife is wonderful," he said. "But she is also protective. When people stare at me in Wal-Mart, for example, she asks them what they are looking at."

"I'm just trying to do my job. I want to be employable and productive, and supportive of my family and our country. These are not impossible statements of mission, but they aren't heard as often as they should be from people with disabilities. I hope that by being 'out there' I am helping to change that perception."

Usher is sincere about these ideals, and he is never too far away from his old motivational speech beliefs.

"It is important for all people to have goals and visions and dreams," he said. "Some people with disabilities cannot articulate those things as well as some others, but the dreams and hopes and aspirations are still there. Whether you are the star quarterback or a doctor or a financial advisor, we are all people. If I stayed in an armchair you'd never know I had a dis-

ability, but an armchair is not where I was meant to stay!"

Usher feels it is a huge challenge for people with disabilities to make others comfortable.

"I'm not going to shatter when I fall and hit the floor, but until they see me get back up they can't know that. The same thing with me driving a car. People just have to see us do things and we need to be out there doing them."

"I've been laughed at and called names, but I get up and move on," he said. "Physical obstacles impede my progress but I move on. This has been my life and will continue to be. I can't keep asking God 'Why me?' That's not important for me to know. God made me as part of his overall plan. Where do I fit in? I'm not sure. I have a couple of hundred clients who depend on me for their financial future. I have a wife and daughter who depend on me. I have a family and friends who love me. Maybe that's where I fit in."

John Woods is more than a supervisor

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he's very bright but he doesn't always make quick, rational decisions. I try to keep him in his routine. Sometimes you gotta say, 'Look at me James. Look at my eyes.' Once you get his attention he will do anything you ask. He questions what we do but he

respects me as the authority figure. But he's real clever and he knows how to play on your intelligence."

"He gets along with everybody here very well. When he comes in from home agitated I find out what's wrong with him and

calm him down and say that's not happening here. Be an adult. Me and James, we're pretty cool. He knows what's expected and he does it. Like I say, he's been here 18 years and he is just part of our team. A special part."



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