



Media Release

Contact:

**Kandy Cayce, DHS Division of Services for the Blind
(501) 682-0332**

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Hot Springs massage therapist who's blind wins service award

If you've taken a thermal bath and had a massage at one of the major hotels in Hot Springs, chances are you've met 75-year-old Buford Stinnett, a certified massage therapist who has been named as the area's Consumer of the Year (COY) by the Arkansas Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB).

Because of his determination to overcome adversity and succeed at work, Stinnett has been chosen as one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award. DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Matt Lyles nominated him for the award from an area that includes Saline, Garland, Grant, Hot Spring, and Clark counties.

The award presentation will be made at a meeting of the Hot Springs Lions Club at the Arlington Resort Hotel and Spa on October 4, at 6:15 p.m. His employer, the Arlington Resort Hotel and Spa, will be recognized as the area Employer of the Year by DSB.

Stinnett has worked as massage therapist for 14 years. Before the Majestic Hotel closed, Stinnett worked at both it and the Arlington Resort Hotel and Spa. Now he only works at the Arlington.

Stinnett entered the workforce while he was still in high school. When he was a teenager, he worked at the Mason Brandon Workshop in Nashville, Tenn. Later he operated snack bars in Vending Facility Programs in Tennessee, Ohio and Arkansas.

He landed a quality control job for a national company, American Health Supplies, based in Chicago. He traveled across the country checking to ensure the stores met company standards. He eventually became tired of travel and left this job.

When he moved to Arkansas, his DSB counselor asked if he'd considered going back to school. They discussed options and he decided to enroll at Exceptional Massage Institute. He said he was the first totally blind student the school had taught. "The first two days were tough, but the third day I was introduced to Mr. Bones and everything was all right from there." Mr. Bones was a model skeleton that students could take apart and touch. Stinnett said he also "had a good reader" to read his textbooks to him.

"DSB was involved when I was going to massage school. If I wanted to know something, I'd pick up the phone and get their advice. The relationships I have with all the people at DSB have been invaluable. If it had not been for DSB, I probably wouldn't be where I am now," Stinnett said.

Arkansas requires massage therapists to be re-certified every two years, which means taking continuing education classes and being re-tested for licensure. DSB has helped pay his fees for classes and the licensing exam. "Mr. Stinnett successfully obtained his license renewal while maintaining his usual work schedule. Mr. Stinnett is a man of much experience in coping with blindness and the challenges it brings. He most definitely deserves this award," Lyles said.

When mentoring others who are newly blind, Stinnett gives this advice: "Get yourself to the point you feel comfortable with your life. There's no reason why blind people should sit at home anymore. I had to decide I wanted to live my life. I'm one of the few blind people who'll step out and try whatever I want to do. I may not make it, but I try. I've been extremely happy. I have friends in all different professions."

He feels like he receives as much from his relationships with his customers as they do from him. "My customers tell me things that I need to know, and I tell them things (like tourist information). For example, one of my customers told me something simple about my diabetes that's proven to be very valuable. He told me always remember portion size is the most important thing. Also, if you find a food that raises your blood sugar, avoid that food. For me, it's pineapples and watermelons."

At one time he collected car license plates and wanted an odd shaped tag that the State of Tennessee had. He told a customer about it and later the customer sent him one.

Stinnett has three children and 11 grandchildren. His hobbies are collecting knives and vintage model cars.

This is the fifth year that DSB has given Consumer of the Year awards to recognize individuals who have managed their rehabilitation plans, gained marketable skills, secured good jobs, and become role models for others. At the end of the year, the DSB Board will select an overall state winner from the area winners who were nominated. The announcement will be made at the board meeting Dec. 14, and will be followed by a reception.

DSB provides vocational rehabilitation services to individuals who are blind or severely visually impaired and whose goal is successful employment. The division also serves youth and older blind individuals. For information about DSB's programs and services, call 1-800-960-9270 or 501-682-5463 or visit the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx>.