



Media Release

Contact:

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

For Immediate Release

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Conway woman bucks unemployment trend, wins area award

In a time when college graduates are facing record unemployment, Kara Elise Clarke of Conway landed a good-paying job before she even graduated. In addition to facing the sagging economy, Clarke is severely visually impaired and faced even higher unemployment rates for people with a disability.

She understood there would be obstacles along the path to achieving her goal of finding a job. Clarke's father is visually impaired and his experiences helped prepare her for the challenges ahead. She knew she would have to make good grades, graduate from a university and be persistent in her job search.

A month before receiving her Bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems from the University of Central Arkansas, Clarke mounted an intensive job search. She attained a job as an Information Tech Specialist at Dillard's corporate headquarters. She's a computer programmer for the human resources department and maintains systems for payroll, commissions and bonuses.

As a result of her determination and success, Clarke has been named as the area's Consumer of the Year by the Arkansas Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB). She is one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award. An overall state winner will be named at the end of the year. The award presentation will be at the Founders Lions Club's noon meeting Aug. 31, at Lions World Services for the Blind. Her employer, Dillard's, will be recognized as the area Employer of the Year by DSB.

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“I was really surprised. I didn’t know this award existed. It’s awesome and I’m really excited,” Clarke said. “I was really happy when Dwight (her counselor) told me I was the first one he thought about nominating for the award.”

Clarke’s Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Dwight Turner said Clark was determined to succeed.

“Kara was determined to complete her education and become employed in the field of work she had chosen. She fulfilled all her educational requirements and sought employment without asking for our assistance. Even before she graduated she was not only ready to work, but had found employment with Dillard’s,” Turner said. “She cooperated in the development and execution of her rehabilitation plan with DSB. Working with her and watching her grow as a person was a pleasure. She has not let her visual impairment stand in her way. I am very proud of Kara. I thought she was very focused on what she wanted to do.”

The newlywed said her then-fiancée Andrew “really helped me focus in my last year of school.” They married July 17. Her husband Andrew said, “Kara has a lot of determination once she sets her mind to something. Once she decided to succeed, nothing much could stop her.”

Clarke said the one of the keys to success was to follow her passion. She said, “I’ve always loved computers.”

She said she appreciated DSB’s paying for her books and tuition and assisting her with living expenses. “Kara has a drive to get her job done well and on time. She’s great to work with. She fits in well with our team,” said her supervisor Melissa Riddle.

Clarke said she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa (RP). This is the name for a group of eye diseases that cause the thin layer of tissue in the back of the eye, which is called the retina, to deteriorate. RP is genetic and damages the cells in the retina that sense light. These cells are known as rods and cones. The rods are associated with side and night vision. RP mutates the genes of the rod cells and they slowly stop working. As this happens, peripheral vision is slowly lost. Progression of RP is different in each case. Clarke can still read a computer screen.

She encourages others to learn to use technology to their advantage “because, at the rate technology moves and develops, what wasn’t possible yesterday, you can do today, and who knows what we can do tomorrow.” Her father uses Job Access with Speech (JAWS) screen reading software that makes personal computers accessible to people who are blind and visually impaired. Information is displayed on the screen via text-to-speech or a Braille display.

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Some people with low vision might benefit from magnifying tools or a closed circuit television system (CCTV), which consists of a video camera connected to a computer monitor. Materials can be placed under the camera and an enlarged image of the material is displayed on the monitor. It can also display words as dark text on a light background or light text on a dark background, depending on a person's visual needs.

This is the fourth 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. 9, 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>.