



## Media Release

---

Contact:

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

**For Immediate Release**

September 13, 2011

### **Hurricane evacuee who's blind relocates, wins award for serving others**

Hurricane Katrina devastated Melissa D. Deroche's home in 2005. Like many evacuees, she came to Arkansas and decided to stay. She was a Licensed Professional Counselor in Louisiana and wanted a job here helping people like herself who were blind or visually impaired.

After becoming licensed in Arkansas, she found employment as a counselor with the Arkansas State Hospital and finally with Lion's World Services for the Blind as a counselor assisting individuals with vision loss who want to be self-sufficient.

"It has taken awhile to get adjusted, but I've met a lot of good people," said Deroche, who now lives in Little Rock. She has gotten involved with the community and is active in St. Luke's Episcopal Church in North Little Rock. She's been a walker in the past two Races for the Cure and is preparing to do a half marathon during the Little Rock Marathon. Deroche "knows about disasters" and recently completed training as part of the Arkansas Crisis Response Team. "Having the experience (of being in Hurricane Katrina) gives me a unique insight."

Because of her perseverance in overcoming adversity and her service to others, Deroche has been named as an area 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. She was chosen from the area that includes Prairie, Lonoke, and part of Pulaski counties. An overall state winner will be named at the end of the year. Her employer, Lions World Services for the Blind (LWSB), will be recognized as the area Employer of the Year by DSB.

"I was surprised, but honored by the nomination," said Deroche, who has been blind since birth. The award presentation will at the noon meeting of the Founders Lions Club September 14, at LWSB.

-more-

“She has been extremely successful,” said Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Christy Lamas, who nominated her. “Ms. Deroche began her career after graduate school by working in a community mental health agency through Ameri-Corps. The Ameri-Corps in New Orleans had never experienced a totally blind, graduate school educated woman before. Melissa gently guided them, carved her own employment setting out, and assisted them in understanding her needs and her abilities. She took this forward thinking approach with her in a mental health position as a behavior analyst with Bancroft Neuro Health and then when she was forced to leave her home in New Orleans.”

Deroche received her undergraduate degree in Psychology with a minor in Sociology from the University of New Orleans (UNO) and later completed her Master's degree from UNO. She became a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in 1999.

“She is an example to others of professionalism, poise, how to approach adversity and what it takes to move from problem to resolution. She is an exemplary self-advocate. She knows and understands the systems at all levels and how to access them to the betterment of not only herself, but also of others who face challenges and need counseling and guidance,” said Lamas.

Lamas, who had also relocated from Louisiana to Arkansas, appreciated the challenges Deroche faced in her new environment and provided vocational guidance and counseling during the rehabilitation process. Deroche’s needs were assessed both in her home and at the workplace. DSB helped her acquire and learn to use independent living aids. An instructor provided orientation and mobility training to help her travel independently at her workplace, in her neighborhood, and on the Central Arkansas Transit System. DSB worked with Deroche to provide the right assistive technology for her in the workplace. Deroche said she appreciates her counselor and the DSB services provided.

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>.