



Media Release

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Arkansas man who's blind gains freedom, wins achievement award

Ashley Fielding, formerly of Texarkana and now of North Little Rock, who's blind, struggled for 11 years to win his freedom from an abusive situation and become an independent man. He succeeded with the help of various organizations and agencies and today enjoys a full-time job and the right to make his own choices.

Because of his determination to overcome adversity, succeed at work and become a role model for others, Fielding has been chosen as the state's outstanding Consumer of the Year by the Board of the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind. The announcement was made at the DSB Board meeting Dec. 14, and was followed by a reception.

Fielding is a production worker at the Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind in Little Rock. He was recognized as the Lighthouse's employee of the month in August 2012 based on his perfect attendance and work performance.

His employer has been named as the state Employer of the Year by DSB as an outstanding business partner for its commitment to promoting the employment of persons with vision impairment. The Lighthouse manufactures clothing and equipment for the military and office products for other groups. It is a competitive employer that pays above minimum wage.

Fielding said his main message to others "is never give up. Stand strong. Do your best and have a positive attitude" no matter what your situation might be.

Fielding said he was afraid to speak up for himself, but he has now found his voice. "At first, I had to learn that nobody was going to hurt me." His stepmother had had Fielding determined incapacitated by the court and gained control of his finances (survivors benefits from his father's death, disability

payments and his sheltered workshop pay). He has fought hard to demonstrate his abilities to the legal system. “I got myself set free. I’m happy now. I’m mighty proud of myself for that.” Fielding said he persisted and survived by “listening to God’s word. A still, small voice kept telling me to get out (of the situation he was in).”

Fielding was born blind and is a graduate of Arkansas School for the Blind. When he was six years old, his parents divorced and custody was given to his father and the new wife. Ashley’s mother, Patricia Smith, said she was a waitress then and didn’t have the means to pay an attorney for a custody battle. Upon the father’s death, the stepmother became his legal guardian. Throughout this time Smith tried to gain custody.

Eventually Ashley began his own legal quest for freedom. His court-appointed attorney discovered DSB and referred him for services, but his attorney had to get a court order before the stepmother would allow the DSB counselor to interview Fielding. “Ashley had been in and out of court for years with no progress before we got involved,” said DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Dawna Fultz. In the process of assessing Fielding’s independence skills, Rehabilitation Teacher Tanya VanHouten and Fultz found there was no food in the house, because his stepmother guardian was keeping all of his money. “It became an adult protective issue,” VanHouten said.

“Ashley progressed from a workshop setting where he felt he was noncontributory to a 40- hour-week job (at Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind),” said Fultz. DSB paid his apartment rent and bus transportation so he could get to work while his stepmother, who was in contempt of court, withheld his money. VanHouten and Fultz sometimes bought him groceries out of their own pockets. “My supervisor at Lighthouse even bought me a sandwich for lunch one morning,” Fielding said. “The (Lighthouse) human resources department helped me too.” Now Fielding can buy his own food and has learned to prepare meals.

“Now I’m actually getting the medical care I need,” Fielding said. He’s seeing a dentist, and a sleep study he needed is being done.

VanHouten taught him independent living skills and how to use technology. DSB bought a Victor Stream for him. This compact device allows the blind to download books and other information to listen to, works as a recording device or an MP3 player. “Now he’s an avid learner. He’s constantly looking up things,” said VanHouten.

DSB also paid for training at World Services for the Blind, where Fielding learned mobility skills, keyboarding, additional independent living skills, and how to interact with others. Even though he’s completed his training there, he’s still allowed to participate in WSB activities. He said he’s enjoyed going to a local steak house, a comedy club, and shopping.

After his apartment complex was bought by a university for other purposes, Fielding moved in with his natural mother. The arrangement is working well. "I'm grateful to everyone who's helped Ashley," Smith said. "I'm so proud of him." His stepmother has finally relinquished guardianship.

Fultz said all of this "has been life changing for Ashley" who's now in his 30's. Fultz thinks the tide turned when the judge originally involved in the case passed away and a new judge "who was willing to listen" was assigned.

"Sometimes society does not look at people who are blind and visually impaired in light of their capabilities, but sees their disabilities instead," said VanHouten. Fultz agreed, saying this is a big issue for the people DSB serves. Both VanHouten and Fultz are visually impaired. "When people get to know people who are blind and visually impaired, they understand and it's not an issue."

Before being chosen for the state honor, Fielding was among only 13 people in Arkansas who received area awards. The other recipients and their employers are: Julie Brooks of Little Rock and the Department of Labor; Erika Evans of Sherwood and the Pulaski County Special School District; Diana Scroggins of Cleveland, AR, now of North Little Rock and employed by Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind; David Naumann of Bentonville, now of Austin, TX, and Kellen Bassham of Mountain Home, now of Memphis, TN, both employed by the Internal Revenue Service; Ethel Fowler of Blytheville and the Equal Opportunity Commission; Billy Harrison of Newport and Taylor Made Ambulance; Willie Battle of Stamps, who owns a business in Magnolia; Jermaine Williams of Grady, near Stuttgart, and St. Michael's Farm; Jessica Birmingham of Osceola and Rivercrest High School; Buford Stinnett of Hot Springs and the Arlington Resort Hotel and Spa; and Rebekah Shaver of Fort Smith, who is a self-employed speech pathologist.

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.

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>.