



Media Release

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For Immediate Release

November 28, 2011

Little Rock man who overcame adversity and went on to help others wins award

Persistence and a positive attitude have guided Gustavo Manzanales of Little Rock all of his life, despite a childhood accident that left him blind.

Manzanales is now a rehabilitation instructor at World Services for the Blind (WSB) and helps others who are blind and visually impaired by teaching them daily living skills, Braille, math, and keyboarding.

“Seeing is important, but the most important vision is the one you envision in your mind,” Manzanales said. “The lack of sight isn’t really a problem or the end of the road. It’s often your own doing that defeats your goals.”

Because of his determination to overcome adversity, his service to others, and success at work, Manzanales 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). He was chosen from the Greater Little Rock area. He is one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award.

The award presentation for Manzanales was at the noon meeting of the Little Rock Founders Lions Club November 16, at WSB, which was recognized as the area Employer of the Year by DSB.

“I was surprised (to be nominated). I wasn’t expecting anything like that. I feel honored,” said Manzanales.

“He deserves this recognition because of his accomplishments,” DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Debera Coleman said. “Gustavo Manzanales exemplifies excellence; he sets goals and works hard to obtain them. He has always been dedicated and committed to his job and his class work at UALR. Mr. Manzanales has demonstrated that he is skilled in overcoming adversity. He has not

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allowed his disability to hold him back in any way. He has proven to be an exceptional individual. Mr. Manzanales has always dreamed and has never been afraid to work toward those dreams.”

One of his dreams was making his way in the United States despite his blindness. “I was born in Mexico. We shared a two-story house with another family; we had the upper story. It was like an apartment building in that it had a stairway on the outside. It was old, and the metal stairway had gaps along its railing. Being a curious one-year-old, I went chasing after my mother who’d gone outside to hang clothes. I fell through one of the gaps in the railing and landed 12 feet below. My mother found me sitting in a plastic barrel, not crying, as if I’d had a joy ride. My mother immediately took me to the doctor. He found nothing wrong with me; I didn’t have any broken bones.”

But later his eyesight began to have noticeable problems. He had a few laser surgeries and a cornea transplant in Mexico. “I remember at five-years-old riding my bike, but not being able to see details. Then in school I had to have my face close into my books. My vision was pretty much gone by age 8, but I still had some light perception.” From ages five to eight, he lived with an aunt while his mother worked in the U.S. He remembers going through the border at Tijuana and how happy he was to be reunited with his mother.

When his family lived in California, his mother took him to see an eye specialist, but it was too late. He said if he could have immigrated sooner, the specialist could have diagnosed his retinal detachments and re-attached his retinas. He now has no light perception in either eye.

“The best thing that happened to me was immigrating to the United States. It is here in the United States that I got Braille (instruction), a white cane, and assistive technology.” The family moved to Arkansas when Manzanales was age 13, and his mother enrolled him at Arkansas School for the Blind. When he was in high school, his DSB counselor at the time, Tanya Van Houten, brought him “what seemed like a wonderful box of toys” – a talking clock and other low tech tools for independent living. “DSB taught me how to unlock doors (barriers). DSB was like my locksmith.”

In the summers of 2003 and 2004, Manzanales participated in DSB’s Jump Start program, which prepares high school students who are blind or visually impaired to transition from high school to employment or post-secondary education. DSB arranges part-time jobs for the students in their fields of interest so they can gain insight into their chosen profession. At the time Manzanales aspired to become an attorney, so he was placed in the Arkansas Attorney General’s office. When he returned to Jump Start the second summer, he was placed at the law firm of Chisnall, Nestrud and Julian in Little Rock. In addition to job skills, Jump Start teaches students such as Manzanales independent living

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skills that many people without visual impairments take for granted, such as meal planning, cooking, clothing care, banking, budgeting money, and mobility. Jump Start is the only program of its kind in Arkansas.

After high school Manzanales applied for work at different places, but although he had his work permit, he said employers wouldn't hire him because he is blind. He found work at Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind, and then in 2007, he went to work at WSB.

Manzanales completed his Bachelors degree at UALR while working full time at WSB. He graduated in 2010 with a double major in Psychology and Spanish. He explained he thought it would be easy for him to get a degree in Spanish, but it wasn't as simple as it sounds; he explained it's the same for people born here who major in English. He plans to return to college for a Masters' Degree.

In September 2011, Manzanales became a U.S. citizen. He said this was an "arduous process" even though he is married to someone born in the United States.

Family is important to him. He and his wife Candice have a two-year-old son named Angel. His parents and his three sisters each live within an hour's drive. In his leisure time Manzanales enjoys playing with his child, doing judo, and working out. He plays a variety of musical instruments, "guitar mainly and a little bit of everything else." In high school Manzanales was a wrestler.

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>.