



Media Release

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Fort Smith speech pathologist who's blind wins service award

Speech pathologist Rebekah Shaver of Fort Smith has overcome a mountain of her own obstacles relating to blindness and now has taken on the challenge of helping children with autism.

For her determination to overcome adversity, succeed in her career, and serve others, she has been named as an area Consumer of the Year (COY) by the 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. DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Tina Shores nominated her for the award from an area that includes Sebastian, Montgomery, Scott, Polk, Logan, Johnson, Yell, Crawford, and Franklin counties.

The award presentation will be made at the noon meeting of the Fort Smith Lions Club November 13, at the Golden Coral.

Shaver's uphill battle began at birth with nearsightedness that progressed, resulting in surgery at age 22. At age 30 she had to have cataract surgeries every two weeks for six months. Later she experienced repeated problems with retina detachments. Finally, she was referred to a doctor in Los Angeles, who resolved that issue. Then she had an accident in her home, which caused additional eye problems, surgery and medical care.

She also faced transportation problems. Speech pathologists usually contract with schools for their services and travel between locations. Shaver contracted with the Mountainburg School District for 10 years until losing her transportation. Eventually she was able to open her own office in Fort Smith.

She is now expanding her services to help autistic children, who frequently have multiple barriers including speech and hearing difficulties. Over 700 children are on a waiting list for screening and

possible treatment at Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH). To address this growing population, ACH has created the Community Based Autism Liaison and Treatment (COBALT) program and is training six mini-teams around the state. Shaver and a pediatrician, Dr. Jon Hendrickson, comprise the team to screen and treat autistic children in the Fort Smith area.

"Tina enabled me to continue practicing what I went to college (graduate school) for," said Shaver, expressing her appreciation for DSB's services, including mobility training and purchasing equipment to start and later expand her business.

Shaver and her husband Bill, who's a dentist in Fort Smith, have three grown daughters and are expecting their fourth grandchild. She is active in the First Lutheran Church and enjoys gardening, riding a tandem bike with her husband, exercising at the fitness center, and reading, since her near vision is good enough to allow it.

This is the fifth year that DSB has given Consumer of the Year awards to recognize individuals who have managed their vocational 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>.