



## Media Release

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**For Immediate Release**

September 20, 2011

### **Gassville man overcomes adversity, regains sight, wins award**

It's a classic American story, but with a twist. Born of Italian parents, Michael Bellassai of Gassville was only 15 years old and spoke no English when his family immigrated to the United States. He would attend high school during the day and go to language school at night to learn English. He said "it was hard."

Adapting to a new culture and learning a new language were not the only challenges Bellassai faced. He started having vision problems in high school. After graduation, he found work, but his vision continued to decline. He experienced nightblindness and eventually lost his vision completely. In the following years he had cataract surgeries in each eye, cornea transplants in each eye, a replacement cornea surgery, and continuing anti-rejection medications. Bellassai said his doctor referred him to DSB. Otherwise, he could not have afforded medical treatment and re-joined the workforce. He said his eyesight now "is very good" and he is able to hold two jobs.

Because of his hard work and determination in overcoming adversity, Bellassai 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). He was chosen from the area including Baxter, Boone, Carroll, Fulton, Madison, Marion, Newton, and Searcy counties. Bellassai 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.

Bellassai is employed full time as a janitor at Ranger Boats in Flippin and part time as a cook at The Village Wheel in Bull Shoals, where he works two to four evenings a week depending on the tourist season. "He is an extremely hard worker and holds both jobs successfully," said Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Yadira Cook, who nominated him. "No matter what job he is given, he applies the highest standard of quality of work and is very dependable."

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His employers, Ranger Boats and The Village Wheel, will be recognized as the area Employers of the Year by DSB. The award presentation will be made at Ranger Boats on September 22, at 10:30 a.m.

“Michael has been a model employee. He has always been a valuable team player and demonstrated a great attitude. He’s very dependable and willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. We are lucky to have him,” said Cheryl Davenport, Director of Human Resources at Ranger Boats. “We are honored to be part of the program for the blind and are grateful for employees like Mike.” Bellassai had started there as a part-time employee, but was soon elevated to full-time.

Bellassai said DSB was instrumental in helping him regain his vision and find rewarding employment. The DSB Job Coach for his area assisted him with his job search by helping him construct a resume, practicing mock interviews, and providing transportation to job interviews. The position was one of 10 Job Coach and Job Developer positions in the state created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

The Job Coach also met him at the accessible kiosk DSB installed at the Department of Workforce Services in Mountain Home. DSB has similar kiosks in 17 DWS locations around the state. The kiosks have computers with specialized software that enables people who are blind or visually impaired to access information and search for jobs.

“I wish I could have been born in America,” Bellassai said. His parents wanted to move directly from Italy to the United States, but obtaining a visa took 10 years, so they moved to Casablanca, Morocco in the meantime. Bellassai was born in Morroco in 1953, he says the same year that France gave Morroco its independence. He grew up speaking French and Italian.

Bellassai said he loves to cook even when he isn’t working. It’s his only hobby. He and his wife Sharon attend Twin Lakes Baptist Church. He enjoys traveling and visiting family. He has three brothers and a sister in Kansas City and a brother in North Carolina.

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.

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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>.