



Media Release

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West Memphis woman succeeds despite visual impairment, earns achievement award

Through personal experience, Semonita Sandoval of West Memphis knows what the expression “it’s always darkest before the dawn” means. She lost her vision, her job and her health insurance.

After a two-year struggle, she’s regained her eyesight and is getting back on her feet. Sandoval’s now employed as a Food Preparation Service Worker with Shoney’s in West Memphis.

Because of her determination to overcome adversity, serve others, and succeed at work, Sandoval 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).

She was chosen from the area that includes Crittenden, Mississippi, Cross, St. Francis, Lee, Phillips, and Monroe counties, said Runar Jensen, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, who nominated her for the award. Sandoval is one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award. An overall state Consumer of the Year will be named at the end of the year.

Her employer, Shoney’s, has been named as area Employer of the Year as an outstanding business partner for their commitment to promoting the employment of persons with vision impairment.

The awards will be presented to Sandoval and her employer at the noon meeting of the Rotary Club of Marion at the First United Methodist Church of Marion on Dec.4.

Sandoval said she had been diagnosed with Diabetic Retinopathy, vitreous hemorrhages in both eyes and retinal detachment in one eye. She was no longer able to work and lost her job of nine years with Union Compress cotton warehouse. In turn, Sandoval also lost her health insurance. She needed

help with most activities of daily living and could not travel independently. She had to move in with one of her daughters.

Although Sandoval applied for partial Medicaid, she wasn't eligible. However, the Medicaid worker referred her to DSB for services. Sandoval said she was very appreciative of this, because she did not know about DSB and did not have insurance to pay for needed surgery and medical treatment.

"They helped me a whole lot," she said. "They prevented me from going blind all the way. I appreciate what DHS DSB did for me. I would have been blind without DSB services, but now I can see."

"She has applied for the Access Arkansas Medicaid expansion. This will be very important for the client to be able to continue to control her diabetes and for future eye health," said Jensen.

DSB paid for her surgery and physical restoration of her eyes and provided job readiness skills training and job placement services.

Sandoval said she is thankful for her job. She had previous experience in the restaurant business and a certification in the culinary arts, so Shoney's is a good fit.

After work she enjoys baking, sewing, taking walks, reading, spending time with her three grandchildren, and occasionally volunteering at their schools. She also has two grown daughters, who live in the Memphis-West Memphis area.

This is the sixth 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 adults 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, visit the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx> or call 1-800-960-9270, 501-682-5463, or TDD 501-682-0093.