



Media Release

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Texarkana man who's blind earns award for daring to dream bigger

When Marine veteran Warren Smith of Texarkana became blind, he didn't give up. In fact, he dared to dream bigger. Instead of seeking employment as a massage therapist after graduating from training, he sought to have his own massage therapy business.

"Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do something because you're blind," said Smith. "You just have to find your own way to do it."

Because of his determination to overcome adversity, serve others, and succeed at opening his own business, Smith 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). The award presentation will be made at the 2013 Bi-State Conference for Persons with Disabilities on October 9, at Texarkana College in the Truman Arnold Student Center Great Room. The Bi-State Conference will offer workshops for employers and persons with disabilities.

Smith is one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award and was chosen from the area including Miller, Pike, Little River, Sevier, Howard, Nevada, Hempstead, and Lafayette counties. An overall state winner will be named at the end of the year.

"Mr. Smith took a very proactive approach to becoming a business owner" after successfully completing his training through A Touch for Health School of Massage Therapy in Texarkana, said DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Dawna Fultz, who nominated him for the award.

"This is my first time getting an individual award. In the military it was all about the team. This is my first time to get individual recognition or praise," Smith said. "I'm happy that she nominated me."

Smith joined the Marine Corps after high school. After finishing his military service, he found work at International Paper Company in the lumber mill. After losing his eyesight, he told his DSB

counselor he wanted to return to work and “do something with my hands.” He decided on massage school and DSB paid his tuition.

He said his blindness was not related to his military service or an accident. “I went to work one day and couldn’t go the next day. I got in my truck and thought it was foggy, so I stopped to wipe off the windows. I looked around, but everything was foggy. It wasn’t just the windows. I was still married then, and my wife took me to the doctor. He diagnosed me with systemic sarcoidosis and said there was no cure.” Sarcoidosis is an inflammatory disease that can affect any organ in the body. When it manifests in the eyes, it may result in loss of vision or total blindness. Smith lost all useful vision.

“I had to find me something to do,” he said, explaining he has a 12-year-old son, Warren Smith Jr. “I didn’t want my son to see me lying around doing nothing. He’s my little buddy. We went to the (middle school) football game Friday night. We flew to California to see some of my folks this summer. We’re going to the football game this week. You can’t sit at home just because you’re blind.”

His counselor praised his initiative. “He worked with the small business department at Texarkana College to successfully develop and implement his business plan. Mr. Smith contacted the Texarkana City offices and determined where and how to obtain city permits. He also followed through with applying and obtaining his license in both Texas and Arkansas. He paid to remodel his garage to provide a very nice business setting for massage therapy,” Fultz said.

He relies on word-of-mouth and a Facebook account his sister helped him set up to attract customers to his massage business.

The Bi-State Coalition, which is coordinating the conference where the award will be presented, is a partnership between businesses, Arkansas and Texas state and local agencies, vendors, schools, and persons with disabilities. The Coalition promotes the value of hiring persons with disabilities and serves as a resource for information to employers.

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.