

Media Release

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Mountain Home man has vision restored, earns achievement award

David “Dave” Gentry of Mountain Home, a self-employed dive shop owner and scuba diving instructor, has been named as an area Consumer of the Year by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB).

Because of his determination to overcome adversity, serve others, and succeed at work, DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Carla Hiebsch nominated him for the achievement award.

Gentry was diagnosed with cataracts, dermatochalasis (sagging eyelids), and brow ptosis (descent of the brow), all of which were progressive in nature. Fortunately, his vision was able to be restored through surgeries, enabling him to continue a career he enjoyed and keep his business.

“Slowly I’d gotten tunnel vision. I was light sensitive,” he said. “The worst problems were the bags under my eyes. They were seriously affecting my job. My surgery was not cosmetic. When I’d dive, my eyelids would fill up with water, completely shutting my eyes. It was getting to the point that I was afraid of taking people down,” Gentry said. “After surgery, my peripheral vision was amazing. I could see my students without having to turn my head.”



From the left are Lee Belicek, president of the Mountain Home Lions Club; local businessman Dave Gentry of Mountain Home; and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Carla Hiebsch. Gentry was named as an area Consumer of the Year by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind. The award presentation was made at the Lions Club on September 24.

Gentry is one of only 13 people in Arkansas who will receive an area award and was chosen from the area including Baxter, Benton, Boone, Carroll, and Marion counties.

The award presentation was made at the noon meeting of the Mountain Home Lions Club, held at the El Chico restaurant on September 24.

Gentry said he's "tickled to death" with DSB services. "They did a heck of a job. (The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and Rehabilitation Teacher) were very professional. I had no idea what I was walking into. They answered questions before I even knew I had the question. It was really nice that they were there. Losing your vision puts a fear in you down deep. I didn't know anyone who'd had similar vision problems. It was good to have someone to talk to who understood."

"I'd never heard about DSB," he said. A friend's wife had recommended the eye clinic across the street from Gentry's dive shop. He was diagnosed and told about DSB services. Gentry said he appreciates DSB for helping restore his sight and enabling him to maintain his self-employment. DSB paid for his surgeries and provided adaptive aids, such as special sunglasses.

"Until I had the cataracts fixed, I didn't realize how much I was missing. It's pretty cool (seeing again). I had no idea my eyes were as bad as they were," he said. "It changed everything for me. Going down the road I didn't know how many signs I couldn't read – or at least the smaller print. I'd slow down to try and read the signs and worry that other drivers would run over me. At night the headlights don't knock my eyes out like they used to."

Before changing careers, Gentry had been a bricklayer for 17 years, but said, "I had always been a water duck." He learned how to scuba dive and took up spearfishing. "I really enjoyed it and was missing too much work." The dive shop owner who taught him to dive offered him a job helping with his charter boat business and Gentry quickly accepted. He became a certified diver, then a dive master, and finally a fully licensed dive instructor. Gentry started his own dive shop in September 1990, and is entering his 25th year in business. In addition to selling diving and snorkeling equipment through the shop, Gentry teaches dive classes at a local lake and is able to certify his students as licensed divers when they finish the classes.

"I work seven days a week for seven months," Gentry said of his dive shop and scuba instruction. In the off season, he operates a screenprinting business. In addition to his local clientele, he has an online customer base. Resorts and marinas want to get their inventories of t-shirts and other screenprinted items before the tourist season starts, so Gentry is able to keep his income steady in the off season. His flexible hours in the off season allow him time to enjoy hunting and fishing.

This is the seventh 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. An overall state winner will be selected at the end of the year.

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.