OLD FIELDS RESIDENT EARNS DISTRICT'S 'ABILITY WORKS' HONOR

Moorefield, WV — July 23, 2009 — When the phone rings at Eastern WV Community and Technical College, likely as not Donna Southerly will answer. As Eastern's main receptionist, she performs a uniquely vital task.

"Donna is the first person most people meet or speak with when they first make contact with the college," noted Monica Snyder, associate director of admissions. "So thank goodness she's not shy!"



Donna Southerly, Eastern's Receptionist and 'central anchor'.

In fact, people who meet Southerly for the first time in the course of her working day usually come away with an impression of the outgoing, caring, engaged and confident woman her colleagues know and respect. Yet, as she's the first to tell you, "I wasn't always that way. If you knew me five years ago, you wouldn't know I was the same person—because I wasn't!"

Southerly's challenging journey from a confined shut-in on disability to an honors college student and valued fulltime employee mirrored her personal transition from a

"timid, self-conscious" existence to a determined and purpose-driven life. Her individual strength, the resolve that she has developed, and the success that flowed from it, earned her this summer's nomination by the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) as the Martinsburg District 'Ability Works' Recipient.

College-Bound

A resident of Old Fields, Southerly takes pride at being chosen as a poster child for the state's social services agency. "Before I went to rehab services, I'd been homebound for five years," she said. Wrestling with serious knee and back problems, Southerly had reached the point where it was a struggle just to go out.

"When Donna came to see me in 2004, she was walking with a cane," recalled Linda Porter, senior rehabilitation counselor at the DRS' Moorefield office. "And she'd been looking for work for some time." Porter realized that to find steady employment, Southerly would first need additional training.

"So I helped her to get an Associate Degree," said Porter, who arranged for DRS to sponsor Southerly's college tuition for two years.

"Linda Porter set up an appointment for me with the Eastern learner support services counselor, who was just wonderful," said Southerly. "It had been 32 years since I'd graduated high school, and I'd never taken any college courses before. So the placement test Eastern's counselor gave me showed that I needed to take some refresher classes—what they call 'developmental'—in English and math."

Honors Roll

With the assistance of Eastern's one-on-one academic counseling and 'College Success' study skills class, Southerly completed those developmental classes, and then went on to excel academically at Eastern. "Donna was an excellent, truly motivated student," Porter said. "She had a 3.94 grade-point-average overall while at Eastern."

Southerly earned Dean's List or President's List honors in each of the four following semesters. In December of 2006—as a member of Phi Theta Kappa, the academic honors society for two-year colleges, and president of Eastern's Student Government Association—Southerly received her Associate in Arts (AA) Degree.

By next spring, Southerly plans to complete all the requirements for her Regents' bachelor's degree. And from there, in part due to her own positive experience, she also expects to continue her studies for a Master's degree and a career in rehabilitation counseling.

"The people who work at Rehab Services and at Eastern truly saved my life," Southerly emphasized. "When I first came to Eastern to fill out the application, I was physically shaking. Now, I don't have that fear. You see me as a confident person, and I feel I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. And if it weren't for the people who work at those two organizations, I'd still be sitting at home."

Valued Contributions

The DRS sets fulltime employment as the ultimate goal for clients, Porter observed. "And not just any employment," she pointed out. "We want them to find employment that they enjoy, where they feel they are contributing something to others."

After seeing Southerly's work ethic as an evening access center coordinator while still a student, and her later work as a part-time, substitute receptionist, in 2008 Eastern offered her the fulltime receptionist position that she currently holds.

And at Eastern, her supervisors and colleagues have little doubt about the value of her contributions. "As the college year flows from semester to semester, Donna, as our knowledgeable receptionist, presents our public face to the community," said Grover Duling, Eastern's dean for career services and academics, "and serves as a kind of central anchor, offering safe mooring to our students, visitors, faculty and staff."

Having followed the DRS program and achieved its goals so successfully, Southerly earned an "Ability Works" award for 2009. The Division of Rehabilitation Services will honor her, along with five other statewide awardees, this coming October in Institute.

For more information about Eastern's financial aid opportunities, programs of study and workforce and community education, call toll free: 877-982-2322; or check the College's website: "www.eastern.wvnet.edu".

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