

TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE



All around the state of Ohio, individuals with developmental disabilities have become active, productive members of their communities. They do this by living independently, working in their communities, and developing friendships and relationships.

In this brochure, the first of a series, the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council has tried to capture the spirit of those individuals in photos and print. Each of these incredible individuals is as unique as the path they followed to achieve their independence.

Here are their stories.





CAROLYN KNIGHT
EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR
OHIO
DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITIES
COUNCIL

Independence.

We celebrate it as a nation every July 4th, but as individuals we sometimes take it for granted.

While we live in the most independent nation on the face of the earth, independence hasn't

always been a given for individuals with developmental disabilities. The rights of these individuals, some of whom are the most vulnerable in our society, were largely ignored for many, many years.

Thankfully that has changed dramatically in recent years. In particular, the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 – known as the DD Act – requires that supports and services for individuals with developmental disabilities must be driven by self-determination. Simply put, self-determination is a person's ability to take action in his or her life to get the things he or she wants and needs. Self-determination gives a person the right to choose.

Throughout the years, self-determination has helped individuals with developmental disabilities become self-advocates, standing up for their own rights and gaining independence in the way they choose to live. But it's not an easy process. It requires a person to have the skills, drive, and determination to practice self-determination.

We scoured the State of Ohio for individuals with developmental disabilities who, through various ways, have secured their own independence. It is this independence – through self-determination – we celebrate on these pages.

I hope you enjoy getting to know these incredible individuals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carolyn Knight". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Carolyn Knight

RENEE WOOD

A Determined Force

Renee Wood was five-years old when the reality of her disability slapped her full in the face. Her sister, Karen, had been invited to a neighborhood birthday party, but Renee got snubbed. "I was not happy about it," she recalled.

Her grandmother said, "Renee is going to have to learn that she can't do everything Karen can do." Renee heard these words come out of her grandmother's mouth, and...

"I thought to myself, 'You wanna bet?'"

Renee's response was a foreshadowing of the determined woman she would become.

"My mom called me, 'The Dreamer,'" she said. "Even when I was younger I had this sense that I was treated differently than everyone else. People would say, 'You've just got to learn that this is your fate in life.'"

At the very recollection of those words, Renee about comes out of her scooter. Her mouth tightens and her eyes widen. "How is that my fate in life?"

If you had to pick a single word to describe Renee Wood, you would only need to spend a few minutes with her to come up with it: Independent. With a capital "I."

After she graduated from high school, her parents began looking for a house with a first-floor bedroom and bathroom to accommodate a daughter with cerebral palsy. Renee said, "I told them, 'If you're buying this house because you think I'm staying, don't, because I'm not staying here.'"

They didn't believe her until their headstrong daughter ran away in the middle of the night.

"My mom called my boyfriend and said to bring me home or she would call the police. She said I was incompetent," Renee said. "He said, 'Call the police if you want, but Renee is 19-years old, and she is the

most competent person I know. I'll bring her home if and when she wants.'"

About that same time, she was evaluated for employment. "They told me there was a 70-percent chance that I'd end up working in a sheltered workshop," Renee recalled. "I told them there was a zero-percent chance I was going to work there."

Renee's entire life has been one of fierce independence and proving people wrong. She has lived independently since the night she left home. She has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Toledo.

Renee has worked a variety of jobs, including as a tutor, job coach and disability rights advocate at the Ability Center of Greater Toledo, and as an accessibility consultant for the Catholic Diocese of Toledo. She is now an independent contractor with the Lucas County Board of Developmental Disabilities, making a presentation called "What is Home" to providers and service and support administrators. She also serves as a special advisor to the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council.

With her extensive knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Renee regularly receives phone calls from individuals with disabilities who need assistance finding homes or have other issues where bureaucratic red tape interferes with their ability to live full lives. She said, "I take on the challenge of assisting people who find it difficult to fend for themselves."

She also has a blog - Renee's Ramblings - in which she addresses many issues being faced by individuals with disabilities.

At age 56, she now lives in a neat, ranch home on Toledo's south side with her husband of 13 years, Floris. "Renee is the most confident person I know," Floris said. "She is an amazing woman."



HEATHER AND JEB MCFARLIN

They Are Never Turning Back

The first day Jeb McFarlin saw Heather Miller walking through Double S Industries in Sandusky, he elbowed one of his buddies and asked, “Who’s that?”

“Her name’s Heather,” said the buddy. “Why do you want to know?”

“She’s cute. I think I’m going to ask her out,” Jeb said.

“Don’t bother,” the buddy replied. “Her mother is real picky.”

It’s a good thing Jeb is a confident man and didn’t listen to his buddy. And, it’s an equally good thing that Heather is an independent woman who didn’t seek her mother’s approval.

They have been married more than two years.

The couple live in their own apartment in Sandusky, where Jeb works within walking distance of his job in the maintenance department at the nearby mall. Heather is a dietary aide at an assisted care facility in Vermillion. Heather said her service and support administrator at the Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities was extremely helpful in assisting her locate an apartment.

They are both fiercely independent and strong advocates of self-determination. They also are graduates of Project STIR. In 2013, they were honored by the Ohio Self-Determination Association with an ESDY Award.

“We are extremely proud of Heather and Jeb and all they have accomplished,” said Carrie Beier, superintendent of the Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

“Our overarching goal for the individuals we serve is to see them become independent and contribute back to society. Jeb and Heather are shining examples. Their story should be an example for others who seek the independence of community living.”

Heather grew up in Brewster, Ohio, and moved to the Sandusky area after graduating high school.

Afterwards, she lived with her mother, a boyfriend and tried several group homes. However, she never found the independence she craved.

“I didn’t like someone telling me what to do, or when to eat, or where I could go,” Heather said.

“When you live in a group home you can’t just get up and go. It’s not like living independently where you make your own decisions. Sometimes, if you want to go somewhere and the other ones don’t want to go, you can’t go. I didn’t like that. It’s a lose-lose situation. I like doing my own thing.”

Heather and Jeb credit the SELF waiver for supporting them to live independently in the community.

Since arriving in Erie County, Heather married Jeb, successfully petitioned to become her own guardian, interviewed for jobs outside the traditional day services, and increased her participation in self-advocacy groups.

“I never wanted to speak up for myself until I got to Erie County and found out there was a self-determination group,” Heather said. “I’ve learned to speak up and stand up for myself.”

Jeb grew up locally in Milan and graduated from Edison High School. He had lived with his parents prior to getting the apartment with Heather. He has adjusted well to being married and living independently.

“Through self-determination, I’ve learned to speak for myself and be a self-advocate,” Jeb said.

“He’s a good guy,” Heather said. “He helps me out a lot.”

They are a familiar sight in their adopted home town of Sandusky, where they go out frequently. They enjoy dining out, going to movies and the bowling alley.

“We’re happily married,” Heather said. “It was an adjustment, living with Jeb. But it has been a good adjustment. The best part of getting married is I get the love and support of my ever-loving husband.”



ZACH PUDDOCK

A Never-Say-Die Attitude

An outsider might look at Zach Puddock's situation and think that life isn't fair.

Zach had worked hard to develop an independent lifestyle and was never one to let his disability get in the way. Then, on Jan. 7, 2010, he was in a horrific bus crash that killed four individuals, including his roommate, and left Zach with a traumatic brain injury.

Not fair?

Zach doesn't see it that way. To him, it's simply another hurdle that he has had to overcome on his way to an independent lifestyle. And, it has hardly slowed him down.

Zach, 37, lives independently in Middletown and has worked for the past two years at Easter Seals in Fairfield, where he labels boxes and packages health food bars.

"It makes me proud to pay my own bills," Zach said. Working gives me a sense of accomplishment and I really like my job. I like my house and living on my own."

Zach lives in a neat ranch style home with a roommate. He helps make his own meals - though he is admittedly a big fan of Subway and Kentucky Fried Chicken - and packs his own lunch. He is partial to salami and mustard sandwiches. He has a bank account and enjoys saving and spending his own money. He loves music and is a fan of ZZ Top, Journey and Ted Nugent. Having grown up in the northern Ohio city of Massillon, he also is a big fan of the Cleveland Browns.

The independence he enjoys today is a far cry from the days when Zach lived in a group home with seven roommates. There, he had little say in what he ate, watched on television, or where he went on his own time. He couldn't just go out for a walk, which is one of his favorite activities.

And, he couldn't have any pets. He now has an aquarium of goldfish that he cares for and enjoys feeding.

"It makes me proud to pay my own bills. Working gives me a sense of accomplishment and I really like my job. I like my house and living on my own."

In short, Zach enjoys every aspect of his independence.

"It's my house, so I can do the things I like to do," he said. "I get to do what I want to do when I want to do it."



NAKIEA SPAULDING

An Inspiration to Many

Nakiea Spaulding is an inspiration to most everyone she meets.

However, more important to her is the inspiration she provides to the young lives she touches each day at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

Nakiea has cerebral palsy and uses an electric scooter. But, that has not stopped her from living a full life - inspiring young patients who also have disabilities and giving hope to their parents.

“I work at Children’s Hospital, and I know I’m going to change someone’s life,” she said. “It’s a nice role. I have a purpose in life.”

“I tell my story to the parents that I work with and they say, ‘You live on your own? Wow, do you think my child will be able to live on their own?’ I tell them, ‘Why not? I’m able to do it; They can, too.’”

Nakiea grew up in Cincinnati and graduated from the Cincinnati Academy of Physical Education. She describes herself as “very independent,” and that might be a bit of an understatement.

Nakiea quit a job in a candy factory after she found her current job by searching the help-wanted ads in the local newspaper. “The manufacturing job just wasn’t going to work because there was candy around me every single day,” Nakiea said, laughing. “I went to my job coach and said I think I’ve found a job I’d like at Children’s Hospital. Can we check this out?”

Nakiea calls patients to confirm appointments and often greets them when they arrive.

She also lives independently in a condominium that she purchased.

Prior to having her own place, Nakiea was living in an apartment run by Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled (LADD).

“At the time, I didn’t have credit and had to build that up,” Nakiea said. “I also had to save money to buy my condo, and it took about a year to save up enough.”

Nakiea attended financial classes offered by LADD, which helped her get started on the path to owning her own place.

“I don’t like depending on other people,” Nakiea said. “I like being independent because I don’t like asking other people to do things for me.”

To get to work, Nakiea catches a public bus near her home and takes a 20-minute ride to a stop near the hospital. It’s another 10 minutes on her scooter to her job, and she drives it like a woman on a mission. While Nakiea has other interests, including a boyfriend and an active social life - she loves going to concerts - her job at the hospital and the interaction with the young patients are what motivate her most.

“I work at Children’s Hospital, and I know I’m going to change someone’s life,” she said. “It’s a nice role. I have a purpose in life.”

“I am always in pain, but that doesn’t stop me from trying to achieve in life and trying to prove other people wrong. You have to keep dreaming. Just keep dreaming. Go for the highest dream you can go for.”

She talks to her father about three times a week on the phone. “When I talk to my dad, he always says he loves me and he’s proud of me.”

As any parent should be.



BILLY COOPER

Finds His Niche at Work and Play

The old saying, *You can't judge a book by its cover*, can be applied to Billy Cooper.

Outwardly, Billy is quiet and shy.

But don't be confused by his silent demeanor. Billy is a tiger when it comes to protecting his independence.

He is only 21-years old, but he has his own apartment and a job at Kroger near his home in Pickerington.

"I like my own apartment because I don't have to depend on anyone else," Billy said. "It's my apartment, and I can have friends over if I want. I'm really proud of myself because I live on my own and I have a good job. Getting a paycheck makes me proud because I earned it."

Billy bags groceries, stocks shelves and assists customers with getting their purchases to their cars. "That's what I do, but the best part about my job is meeting new people," Billy said.

After Billy graduated from Brookwood Academy, his attention immediately turned toward getting his own apartment. The Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities provides services to support Billy's independence.

"I'm very proud of Billy," said Laura Sherman, Billy's individual service coordinator. "Just because he's quiet, don't think for one minute that he isn't driven or that he doesn't know what he wants in life. Believe me, Billy knows exactly what he wants."

And what he wants next is a driver's license.

"My goal is to get my driver's license and own my own car so I can have even more freedom," Billy said. "We are looking into getting driving lessons."

He is already an expert driver of sorts. Billy is a gamer and enjoys video games that simulate the driving experience.

When he isn't working or at the controls of his video games, Billy enjoys visiting with his friends and going to the movies. They hang out together, go for pizza and enjoy cruising around in their cars.

Gaining such independence at an early age hasn't been easy, but Billy said it's been worth the effort.

"If I was giving advice to someone, I'd tell them don't be afraid to make mistakes. The one thing I want people to know is I don't have to depend on people, and I'm proud of that."

"If I was giving advice to someone, I'd tell them don't be afraid to make mistakes," Billy said. "The one thing I want people to know is I don't have to depend on other people, and I'm proud of that."



DANNY CASSELL

Homeowner, Hard Worker, Olympian

Danny Cassell is surrounded by reminders of his independence.

One is the Marion home that he purchased. Others are his sports trophies, his bicycle and his cat, Starlight.

But the most dominant reminder hangs on the wall of his second-floor “man cave.”

It is a sign that reads: *My Cave - My Rules.*

Make no mistake about it, Danny Cassell is the king of his castle.

Danny, 52, is a well-known figure in Marion and can commonly be seen pedaling his bicycle to his job at the Family Dollar store. He gets up at 5:30 a.m. three days a week so he can begin his job unloading trucks by 7 a.m.

“I know the truck is going to be over there waiting on me to unload it,” Danny said. “The driver has got other stops to make, so I need to get it done.”

He has been featured in the local newspaper for his tireless work ethic, which has included pedaling his bicycle to work in the snow.

Under the headline, “Postman Has Nothing on Danny Cassell,” a story in the *Marion Star* read: “Neither rain, nor snow nor dark of night can keep Danny Cassell from his job.”

“I have a job, and I’m not just sitting around the house,” Danny said. “When you have a job, you have money in your pocket and money to spend. It makes you feel good.”

Danny has always been independent and a hard worker. Several years ago, he said he got tired of watching his hard-earned money being spent on rent. “When you pay rent, you don’t get anywhere,” he said. “If you buy a house, you own something.”

He solved that issue by purchasing his two-story house on a quiet Marion street. He takes great pride in the appearance of his home, which he cleans each day.

Service and Support Administrator Brad Gerfen, who works with Danny, said the Marion County Board of Developmental Disabilities and Danny’s two sisters worked together to help him locate the house and arrange the financing.

Danny has advice to people who might want to hold a job in the community and own their own home.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “If you want to be like me, don’t be scared. You can get a job and own your own home. I did it. If you give up, you can’t get anywhere in life. You can’t buy your own home.”

Danny’s man cave is adorned with his many trophies - he once finished runner-up in the Special Olympics National Games in bicycle racing - and memorabilia of his beloved Cleveland Browns. “This is my house and the Browns are the kings,” he said.

While he has many interests, it is his job that is the focal point of Danny’s independence. It provides him with the confidence and the funds he needs to live life the way he chooses.

And it is with no small amount of pride that Danny points this out. After all, it is at work where he is known to his co-workers as, Dan the Man.

Danny explained, “They say, ‘Here comes Dan the Man.’ They say that because they know he can get stuff done at the Family Dollar. They know the work is going to get done when Dan the Man is in the house, making sure everything gets done at the Family Dollar store.”





Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council

899 East Broad Street, Suite 203, Columbus, OH 43205

www.ddc.ohio.gov | Telephone: 614-466-5205

Toll Free: 800-766-7426 | Fax: 614-466-0298

The Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council is one of a national network of state councils, committed to self-determination and community inclusion for people with developmental disabilities.

The Council consists of at least 30 members appointed by the governor. Members are people with developmental disabilities, parents and guardians of people with developmental disabilities, representatives from state agencies, and representatives from nonprofit organizations and agencies that provide services to people with developmental disabilities.

One of the Council's goals is to educate and inform how state and local government services and policies can be improved, expanded or strengthened on behalf of people with disabilities.