

Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Advocacy – 2009

- article from Puerto Rico Conference program

Winner - Barbara Schoen

Since Barbara Schoen's spinal cord injury (SCI) in 1997 she became increasingly aware of the significant disparities and barriers faced by many individuals with disabilities. Early on she realized her role to make a difference in the lives of others. Barbara first provided peer counseling at the University of Michigan hospital and served on their Model Spinal Cord Injury Care System Advisory Board.

In 2001, Barbara seized the opportunity to continue her education and entered the Rehabilitation Counseling program at Michigan State University where she learned about the historical oppression of individuals with disabilities as well as the supports and services available to mitigate these differences. During her Practicum and Internship she served at both the University of Michigan and the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living providing outreach and employment services to individuals with disabilities.

Upon completion of her Master's in 2003, Barbara accepted an offer from to complete a two-year training Internship funded by The National Institute of Disability Research and Rehabilitation (NIDRR), which allowed her to acquire advanced training and research in issues critical to consumers with disabilities. While there Barbara secured external funding and implemented a statewide outreach program aimed at empowering rural consumers with SCI. Literally canvassing the state, Barb attending conferences, town hall meetings and other functions in an attempt to develop a network for the dissemination of resources aimed at improving the lives of rural consumers.

Following the completion of the NIDRR training grant Barbara accepted an invitation into the doctoral program at Michigan State for Rehabilitation Counselor Education, where she completed coursework and held both research and teaching assistantships. Under the guidance of Dr. Leahy and in advisement with Duncan Wyeth, Barbara taught a course providing disability awareness to undergraduate students providing some with their first insight into the oppression and discrimination of individuals with disabilities. She also worked in Project Excellent, a program partnering with Michigan's Department of Labor and Economic Growth and Rehabilitation Services to complete statistical analysis of many important programs serving Michigan's consumers including the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Program.

As Barbara planned to lighten her load in January 2008, to complete her dissertation, she received an offer in late December to teach as a Visiting Professor at Florida Atlantic University. By January 2nd (with the help from family and friends) Barbara had settled in a house, secured a nursing staff and introduced herself to faculty and students in one fell swoop. Barbara met her initial teaching obligations and has signed on to teach through Spring of 2010.

Since January Barbara has continued to teach, served on several committees, written a book chapter and mentored students. She is currently presenting with students at three national conferences on topics including the needs of rural consumers. Her dissertation is also focused on rural consumers as she is examining the factors that predict successful employment outcomes for rural consumers with SCI. As a woman with quadriplegia Barbara serves as an example of what an individual can accomplish when provided the supports and services to overcome societal barriers.

Congratulations, Barbara!