

NEWS

**Unity House Consumer Terrell Brooks
Values His Achievements**

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Jaeseena Bertot (Left), consumer Terrell Brooks (Right)

AUBURN – Disabled since birth. Parents divorced, with his mother living in Florida and he and his father unable to find enough common ground to live together. And just three short years ago, unemployed and living in a homeless shelter.

For twenty-six year old Syracuse, NY native Terrell Brooks, to say the least, the future did indeed look bleak.

But through sheer determination and an honest willingness to accept help and follow through on the direction provided him by caretakers who intervened on his behalf, including Unity House of Cayuga County Inc.'s Syracuse-based Unity Employment Services and Syracuse- and Auburn-based Medicaid Service Coordination services, Brooks has turned what was a grim outlook into an independent, productive lifestyle about to be enhanced even further by the purchase of his own vehicle.

What a difference three years can make.

“Back then, I was thinking about doing this and doing that, but really didn’t know how to start or get set up with stuff or have any body to really turn to,” said Brooks, sporting his

trademark NY Yankees baseball hat and three-button team jersey. “Then, the shelter I was at helped hook me up with the VESID folks in Syracuse to start me working on getting a good job.”

That entity (the New York State Office of Vocational Education Services for Individuals with Disabilities) connected Brooks, a Social Security Administration Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiary, with Unity House’s employment services which in turn had him access the agency’s Medicaid services coordination service, housed with the employment services at 518 James Street in Syracuse. Unity Employment Services Manager Jennifer Damon and Medicaid Service Coordinator Jaeseena Bertot began working with Brooks to establish an appropriate service plan that included making available to him Unity House and other community services deemed essential to his welfare and plan goals. Brooks welcomed the help they and other providers offered and credits their commitment to his well-being as a key reason why he stuck with them and his plan’s goals.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without Jen and Jaeseena’s help and Unity House,” he smiles. “They got me goin’ on what I needed to do and have always been really good at checking to see how I’m doing.”

In May 2004 Brooks approached Bertot about leaving Syracuse and moving to Auburn, where Bertot herself was returning to handle Medicaid service coordination duties full-time after splitting her work between there and the agency’s Syracuse offices. Bertot agreed with Brooks that moving out of Syracuse to Auburn and assuming appropriate services there via Unity House and other providers would benefit him more.

“We thought it’d be best for Terrell to be in a new environment that didn’t have the elements of his Syracuse environment that still held some entrenched obstacles to his progress,”

explained Bertot. “We were able to get Terrell into our respite service at our 62 South Street Independent Residential Alternative site and also enroll him in our Day Habilitation service and programs at 31 Market Street. He did well with them from the very start.”

In Auburn, with the help of Unity House’s employment service, Brooks was able to land his first job as a dishwasher at the Pioneer Restaurant, no longer in business. He secured a second job, also as a dishwasher, at Daut’s Restaurant and Tavern on East Genesee Street. From there, displaying a newborn initiative, the affable Brooks shopped his personality and work experience to several Auburn retail food service establishments, including the Pizza Hut on Grant Avenue, where he was hired and has worked as a dishwasher in October 2006.

“I went into the Pizza Hut on a Saturday to fill out an application and left my work history and they called me and interviewed me Tuesday and I got the job then,” he grinned.

“He is always on time, always willing to stay late, and wants to work as many hours as we can give him,” said Steve Bauso, the Grant Avenue Pizza Hut manager and Brooks’s boss.

“He’s a very good employee and a very good young man.”

The 30-35 hours a week Brooks works has been instrumental in his moving into and keeping his own apartment in Auburn. It also has afforded him the chance to buy and drive his own vehicle, with Bertot’s guidance and her and Brooks’ persistence with the PASS program, a federal assistance program to help working individuals with disabilities achieve self-support.

“PASS stands for Plan for Achieving Self-Support,” said Dianna Winter, a PASS program manager working out of its Buffalo, NY offices. “We serve around 50 beneficiaries like Terrell in NY State from the west all the way to the Hudson valley region. Our whole purpose is to qualify and then help individuals like him in a start-up way, to help them on the road to self support status.”

Winter said the program, started in 1974, is needs-based and that Plan applicants need to receive SSI or qualify for it via submission of a plan; have a “countable” income; and target an item, service, or skill in the plan that the individual needs to reach his or her goals.

“We review the plan and determine if what the applicant is seeking is in line with his or her goals, is reasonably priced, and if expenses associated with it are reasonable and necessary,” she said. “With Terrell, we decided a low mileage, good condition, used vehicle met our qualifications for assistance, and we’ll be helping him achieve its purchase with financial aid. He has been great following through with Jaeseena and us on this effort and plan, including justifying to us he will be able to afford all vehicle expenses, including insurance.”

To prepare for this next level of independence, Brooks took and passed the mandatory NY State Drivers License permit and licensure courses and tests in the late fall of 2006. He also has taken and passed a defensive drivers course, which will help reduce his overall vehicle insurance premium.

From living in a shelter and being unemployed to living on his own, working 30-35 hours a week, and soon to be driving his own vehicle, Brooks is profoundly grateful for how his life has changed the past three years.

“I know I’m way better than I was back in Syracuse,” he said. “And I’m happier with how things are. Everybody has been good to me. I look to sort of pay them back by staying with it each day and living good.”