

2011 ANCOR DSP of the Year: Gina Bartlow

BY: TOM KING

Her powerful words quickly convey why Gina Bartlow is the 2011 ANCOR Direct Support Professional (DSP) of the Year.

- “I am an ordinary person doing an important job.”
- “The DSP job description always seems to include something like ‘and other necessary duties not otherwise listed’ because there is no way one can capture all of the responsibilities and challenges that may present themselves in a single day.”
- “So why do I love it so? The change that I see happening in someone’s life is intoxicating. To know that I have contributed in such a profound way makes it all worth it.”
- “... Learn what makes us the same.”

“Learn what makes us the same,” she says. That is the guiding premise of Gina’s philosophy and approach to her job at Twin Rivers Associates in Stratham, N.H., where she is a Lead Senior Instructor in the agency’s Day Program. In June at the 2011 ANCOR Conference, Gina was named the DSP of the Year. She was nominated by Jan Knox, her supervisor and manager of the Twin Rivers Day Program.

“Learn what makes us the same.”

Here is what Jan says about Gina, who has been at Twin Rivers for three years: “Gina’s leadership qualities are excellent and she manages the program in my absence and supervises her peers, which is a delicate balancing act that she is able to manage well. I have managed this program for 19 years and she’s the best hire I have ever had. She is adored by her clients and respected by her peers.”

Gina brings a unique set of life experiences to her DSP role. In addition to the supports she offers nine clients daily, she also supports Steven, her 24-year-old son with Down syndrome who lives at home with Gina and her husband of 30 years, Michael. And living with them for a year now is Ann, a woman with Down syndrome who does not speak and requires Gina to use her sign language skills for communication and providing her supports.

Three years ago, the family moved from California to New Hampshire to support her Dad after her mother’s death. They live in a duplex and share it with their daughter Lisa, her husband and their two children. Their home is now a home to eight people – and she loves it.

Their other daughter, Laura, still lives in California with her husband and 1-year-old daughter.



Gina Bartlow

Age: 55

Home: Raymond, NH

Position: Lead Senior Instructor

Where: The Institute of Professional Practice

Key Quote by Gina:

“DSPs are the backbone of services for the disabled. A DSP must have endless patience, energy, emotional strength, conflict resolution skills and empathy – without sympathy. All at the lowest wage scale of nearly every job out there. To quote the Peace Corps: ‘It’s the toughest job you could ever love.’ “

How a Colleague Describes Gina:

“Her skills with the people she supports is intuitive and spot-on. Gina exemplifies the best qualities of a DSP: kindness, compassion, understanding, patience, common sense and – a big one – a wide streak of humor and fun. I have managed this program for 19 years and I can honestly say she is the best hire I have ever had.” – Jan Knox, Twin Rivers Day Program Manager.

Gina Bartlow cont.

Gina has worked in civil service jobs in her native Massachusetts and in California as a medical secretary and medical transcriber. Interestingly, she has a degree in Interior Design and had a fabric shop business in California making hand-sewn silk lampshades. She is also a quilter. When she moved to New Hampshire, however, all of that ended.

“There aren’t any local fabric shops near my new home, so I searched for another profession to pursue,” she says. “Having some experience with special education and care for the disabled, I applied to Twin Rivers and my career as a DSP began.”

But it really began when Steven was born. “I had to learn a day at a time what to do for him,” Gina says. “I didn’t know what Down syndrome was when he was born. I have learned a lot from Steven through the years and I still do. He has something special inside.”

“It’s a huge honor to be the DSP of the Year. I feel humble.”

Jan also uses the story of Susan, a client in the day program, to illustrate Gina’s good work and soul.

“One of Gina’s clients is Susan, who is experiencing the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s (and has Down syndrome). The relationship these two women share is extraordinary. Gina’s patience with Sue and her deep understanding of her needs go far beyond that of anyone I’ve hired over the past 19 years. Gina and Susan can often be found strolling the grocery aisles as members of our community service team, ‘Twin Rivers Delivers!’ which provides free personal shopping for elders.

Susan has made strong community connections with this program, making friends with people at the stores as well as the seniors Susan herself supports. Gina has also been an unfailing ally to Sue’s family, who is struggling to understand the ramifications and nuances of Susan’s advancing illness.”

Gina also produces the program’s quarterly newsletter *Twin Rivers Slivers* in her spare time. She is a strong voice and advocate for DSPs everywhere.

“It’s a huge honor to be the DSP of the Year. I feel humble. I don’t think I’m better than anybody else, so I am accepting this award on the behalf of all DSPs,” Gina said.

We’ll end with her thoughts on her words, “learn what makes us the same.”

“People need to stop emphasizing what makes people different and bring out and share what makes us the same. That helps people who don’t know a lot about disabilities understand and be aware,” she says. “It doesn’t come naturally. You have to work at it. But if everyone could learn this, the world would be a different place.”



The Job, The People & More: Q&A with Gina Bartlow

Describe your primary responsibilities and your current job:

“I coordinate the daily schedule of activities, weekly field trips, and celebrations for Twin Rivers (day program). I work with 9 clients at Twin Rivers, but am considered as the primary staff for three clients. I help them work on their goals and report on their progress. I assist in the preparation and participation in their annual ISP meeting and maintain regular contact with parents/home providers, so that everybody on the team is well informed. When the Program Coordinator is busy or out of the office, I act on her behalf. In addition I generate our quarterly newsletter, *Twin Rivers Slivers*.”

What is the most enjoyable part of the job for you?

“Going out and having fun with clients is by far the best part of my job. We not only get around in our community, we go places and do things! Exploring areas and activities near us keeps things interesting and helped me learn my way around when I moved here. Recently, we went to see the Big Apple Circus in Boston

and the tall ships in Portsmouth. Future trips include the Special Olympic games and visiting a fish hatchery.”

What is the most challenging part of the job?

“Understanding what makes some people do the things they do. Knowing a person’s diagnosis and understanding their behaviors helps me relate to them. Knowing how to respond to some behaviors can be a challenge, but in addition to working with a great team, my company has a Board Certified Behavior Analyst on staff, so I always feel supported.”

What got you interested in being a DSP?

“I learned a lot raising a son with Down syndrome, especially patience. Being around his friends and schoolmates helped me develop relationships with others with disabilities. Soon I found that we had a lot more in common than differences. Assisting others with having a fulfilling life was something I thought I could do.”

Describe the types of supports you provide for your clients, how many clients you support and in what setting.

"We help them access different community settings and help them work on personal goals. Some goals include maintaining and/or improving physical and mental well-being through physical therapy and regular exercise. We have an exercise room and lots of opportunities to bowl, walk, play basketball and kickball, swim, etc. Some goals include improving math, communication, and writing skills, while others challenge personal growth— independence, respect, handling conflict, trying new things, and remaining active in the community. Our free errand service for elderly and housebound persons keep us very involved with community service."

Tell us a little about the people you support.

"Our clients have a vast range of disabilities, intellectual and physical. Diagnoses include Alzheimer's, Down syndrome, Autism, Muscular Dystrophy, Seizure Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, and heart and lung defects.

Clients choose from a variety of activities and staff, so my assignments change from day to day. Almost every day Susan chooses to work with me. She is an incredible woman with Down

syndrome who is suffering from Alzheimer's. She grew up in N.E., but fondly talks about traveling to England and Germany. Her father was a pilot and she gets excited when planes fly overhead.

After her father passed away

she lived a comfortable life with her mother. My mother and her mother passed at about the same time. I was able to relate to her experience and we have an incredible bond.

"I say volunteer, make a new friend, get involved, learn what makes us the same!"



She has had a hard time coping with change and is often confused and upset. Most of the time she trusts me and I can reason with her and help her get through her day. Our friendship is just as important to me. I make a difference to her and when she tells me I'm special, she really means it. She probably won't live her dream of getting married, but I hope she can live happily ever after.

Would you (or have you) recommend this career to others and why?

"I often tell people stories about all the fun I have at work and they seem interested in DSP work. Perhaps they are intimidated because they don't feel knowledgeable about physical and mental handicaps. Anybody who wants to make a difference can jump in and learn. I say volunteer, make a new friend, get involved, learn what makes us the same!"



The DSP Chronicles

This publication introduces you to Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) from around the country and chronicles their stories as they go about the important work of direct support. They discuss the job: the challenges, the success stories, how they work with those they support and the unique ways they get the job done. DSPs are America's quiet and unknown heroes. Their dedicated and hard work improves the lives of those they support. Many work more than one job. They are devoted to the DSP profession and to those they serve.

If you would like to nominate a DSP to be featured, please contact Tom King at 865.659.3562 (toll free) or email him at tkwrites1021@gmail.com.



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