



# The DSP Chronicles

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## The Job, The People & More: Leona Sawyer

BY: PETER SCHILLING

Flexibility and imagination are assets in any job, but Direct Support Professional (DSP) Leona Sawyer took those strengths to a new level, going so far as to write a book for one of her clients. In a moment of inspiration, Leona created “Byron’s Book”, helping a man keep his job at a department store, and empowering him to become more independent.

Leona lives in Kansas and has been with Topeka Area Retarded Citizens, Inc. (TARC) since 2003. Prior to that, she worked for over two decades as a certified nurses aide. Tired of the same routine, she decided to try something more challenging and interesting. Her stepdaughter worked at TARC and suggested Leona follow suit. “It sounded like fun!” Leona says, and adds that she continues to enjoy the work today.

TARC has its own warehouse and places people with developmental disabilities at various positions there, including printing and

shredding work, as well as in hotels, restaurants, department stores and other businesses around the Topeka area. As an Employment Support Specialist, Leona works both on- and off-site, in the local community. Leona’s been in her current position since 2008, mentoring new hires, coordinating clients with potential employers, and helping TARC’s many job coaches.

**“When you’re a DSP, you’re constantly hit with crises,”**

Leona is extremely valuable in the field. “We want her out in the community,” says Daniel Hermreck, Human Resources Training Coordinator at TARC. He points out that there have been numerous times when one of TARC’s clients have been hired because the employer trusts Leona.

“When you’re a DSP, you’re constantly hit with crises,” Daniel notes. “Leona doesn’t lose focus on the long-term goal of independence, but helps people overcome the day-to-day challenges.” He points out that employers like to know that



Leona Sawyer

**Age:** 50

**Home:** Topeka, KS

**Position:** Employment Support Specialist

**Where:** TARC (Topeka Area Retarded Citizens)

**Key Quote by Kendra:**

“I love this job,” Leona says. “It’s rewarding, and helping people is what makes it so great.”

**How a Colleague Describes Her:**

“Leona doesn’t lose focus on the long-term goal of independence, but helps people overcome the day-to-day challenges.”



there's someone like Leona who has the creativity and intelligence to overcome the many challenges facing TARC hires.

Perhaps the best example of this is a situation involving Byron, one of the people with disabilities that TARC serves. On one job site, he was having trouble staying on task. Byron is in his 40s, and had difficulty holding down past janitorial jobs. He has a hard time reading, making instruction even more challenging.

"I had other people down there as well, and I couldn't just stay with Byron to make sure he remained on task," Leona says. Instead, she created "Byron's Book", a picture book that detailed the work he was supposed to do down to the minute detail.

"Byron's Book" has the day's chores spelled out in photographs. For instance, on one page there is a picture of a table, and then a photo of what chemical to use to clean that table. In another section, there's not only a photo

of a floor, and one of which chemical to use, but diagrams on how to mop the floor, and keep Byron from literally backing himself into a corner.

To create the book, Leona had to sit down and determine Byron's tasks for each day, how to perform these tasks, how to coordinate them with other work being done in the store, to find the best time for him to clean. "It took about a week for me to get it done, but as soon as he saw the book, he knew exactly what to do," Leona says. As an added benefit, the book also helps his various job coaches, often new hires, understand immediately what Byron is supposed to be doing, every minute of the day.

When Leona was promoted to Employment Support Specialist in 2008, she was required to become DSP-Certified through the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP), in fact becoming one of the first three people in the United States to attain such status. To become

credentialed, Leona relied on the DirectCourse/College of Direct Support College (CDS) online curriculum for much of her training.

According to Daniel, the CDS helped inspire "Byron's Book", which Leona also used as part of her work portfolio necessary for credentialing. "The CDS helped Leona see how she could take this learning and apply it to her job."

Leona continually refers to her CDS training in her everyday work. "At first, you may not think you're going to use this information," she recalls. "But as you go on in your career, you find yourself referring to it all the time."

"I love this job," Leona says. "It's rewarding, and helping people is what makes it so great."

## 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 email Lisa Simon at [lisa.simon@elsevier.com](mailto:lisa.simon@elsevier.com).



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