Antoinette Freeman loves her work, and her work is all about people. It’s as simple as that, she says, yet her job as a Direct Support Professional (DSP) at the Hoffnagle House is anything but simple.

Antoinette has worked as a DSP at SPIN Inc. (Special People In Northeast, Inc.) for five years. She supports three young women with intellectual disabilities who live together in a Community Living Arrangement to live an everyday life in the community.

The excellent work she does has not gone unnoticed. In November 2010 she received the Point of Transformation Award from the city of Philadelphia and in November 2009 she was SPIN's Employee of the Month. She was selected for SPIN’s Leadership Opportunities Program and this past September was part of a group of DSPs who met with legislators in Washington, D.C., during the ANCOR Governmental Activities Seminar to discuss the role of the DSPs and the ongoing issue of low wages.

Antoinette supports the three young women – Hannah, Jinnell and Stephanie – and has since they decided to live together at Hoffnagle in June 2009. In her letter to Antoinette about the Employee of the Month honor, here’s what SPIN Executive Director Trina Losinno said of Antoinette:

“Hannah, Jinnell and Stephanie are unique and wonderful women who could keep an army of DSPs busy. Each have moved from a restrictive setting environment and each has had to learn the fine art of balancing choice and independence with responsibility. Not so easy for young 20 somethings. And then there is the issue of three young 20 somethings learning to live together – think dorm nightmare! Well Antoinette, you were not to be deterred by all of this and you calmly and patiently used all of the positive approaches known to woman and helped each young woman learn to deal more appropriately with each situation as it arose. You’ve also introduced them to healthy eating by visiting a produce store, the wonderful benefits of reading by obtaining library cards and the everyday fun of watching animals at a nearby farm. Your secret weapon seems to be guidance rather than telling them what they should do. A smart move since most 20 somethings don’t like being told.”

High praise from the executive director who also uses words like “professionalism” and “wisdom” and “caring” and “role model” to describe Antoinette.

How does Antoinette describe Antoinette?

“I’m a very open person and very easy to work with, outgoing, busy and I want things to run smoothly,” she said. “If there is something that needs to get done I’m not going to wait on someone else to do it – I’ll get it done. I’m a family person and I truly love the three women I support.”

The word family triggers something else about Antoinette. We asked her if she would or had recommended this job and career to other people. She has. Her 24-year-old daughter, Monique, the oldest of her three children, is a DSP at SPIN in the residential program – just like her mother.

The state of Pennsylvania was the first state to adopt the College of Direct Support (CDS) as its DSP workforce development tool and SPIN was the first agency to use CDS. For eight straight years SPIN has been named one of the 125 top training companies in the world by “Training” Magazine and CDS is a part of the reason.

Antoinette says the CDS curriculum has helped her a lot during her five years at SPIN. “It has been very helpful and it’s taught me a lot of things I didn’t know. It has really been great in learning how to deal with different challenging behaviors.”

If you would like to nominate a Direct Support Professional to be profiled in The DSP Chronicles, please send your correspondence to Tom King at tking@collegeofdirectsupport.com. Please briefly explain why you are nominating this person to be featured.
Describe the supports you provide for your clients: “I support three young ladies with varying disabilities in a residential home in northeast Philadelphia. They live in a very nice community with friendly neighbors. Each person has their own unique interests and goals. My primary focus is to support and promote their independence and to encourage them to participate fully in community life and to work hard to reach their goals.”

What is the most enjoyable part of your job? “The most enjoyable part of my job is witnessing the milestones in the lives of the people I support – whether it’s making a friend, getting a job, re-acquainting with family, overcoming a hurdle, becoming more independent, volunteering in the community – seeing people achieve their personal outcomes and knowing that I may have played a small part in the process – that’s very satisfying for me.”

What is the most challenging part of your job? “Supporting people to live out their dreams can be the most rewarding and most challenging part of being a Direct Support Professional. Dealing with barriers and disappointments, at times, can be overwhelming. But being there for the people and helping them to learn and overcome obstacles is an essential part of my role in their lives.”

What got you interested in becoming a DSP? “I became interested in being a DSP through a friend who works in the human services field. I was working in the hospitality industry and I was not enjoying my work. I have always had a passion for helping others. When I learned about this job it sounded like a perfect fit and it has been.”

Would you or have you recommended this career to others and why? “I have recommended this career to several people who I think would be very successful in this field – including my daughter.” (Her daughter Monique, 24, now works as a DSP at SPIN).