

1st Place

Tina Bertram

My name is Tina Bertram and I am a confident, working and active participant of my community. It was not always this way. Becoming disabled at the age of nineteen was not what I had planned for my life.

My life was turned to treatment and doctors and hospital after hospital in the early years. I began to doubt if my life could be normal in any way. Being told you would never work or go to school was devastating. I began to sabotage any goal I created and stopped taking care of myself. It was not until my late twenties that I heard about a group in the community that taught self-advocacy to people with disabilities that I learned that I was important and there were resources out there that I could reach out to help me with what I wanted in life. I was active with this group for two years and moved in to leadership roles. The group disbanded but now I had some skills to move into advocacy groups at Community Mental Health.

I was accepted into the recipient rights commission and two other consumer advocacy groups there. quickly took on leadership roles and my confidence grew. I worked these jobs seriously for five years with the support of staff. I learned how to communicate in discussion groups and how important it was to advocate for the consumers I represented, to learn the issues that affected consumers and address them with the staff at CMH. Ultimately I also moved to training in social injustice issues and joined groups in the community that advocated for people with disabilities. I had finally found my calling.

At 52 now I continue to advocate for people with disabilities. Recently I got a job in the community working in a café about twenty hours a week. It was a new experience and my caseworker set me up with a job coach through MRS. Now that I have someone to bounce issues off I may have on the job, I look forward to a steady community job that at one point thought I would never be able to do.

Advocacy taught me that everyone matters. Being involved gave me the skills and confidence to become a part of my community and a regular job that I am very proud of. I think back to those early years and realize there is hope for everyone with a disability to have the life they want.

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