



CDS Partner Profiles

Grandfather’s Advice Motivates Award-Winning DSP April El

For April El, becoming a direct support professional (DSP) meant following the advice that her grandfather gave her many years ago. “He told me that you can be on the sidelines, or you can get in the game,” April says. “Provide changes for someone else and do something!”

El lives by this advice every day in her role as a DSP for Spurwink Services in Portland, Maine, and her efforts were recognized recently when she was given the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed (NADD) DSP Award for Excellence.

According to NADD, this award is given annually to “a [DSP] whose dedication, advocacy, compassion, competence, person-centered approaches and

collaboration results in improved quality of life, health, and wellness, and/or opportunities for person(s) with intellectual disabilities or mental health needs.”

Ten years ago, April had a decision to make. An avid traveler, she had a job offer in Chicago with United Airlines, the ideal job for someone who wanted to see the world. But being born and raised in Maine, and feeling the need to stay near her family, and, as her grandfather pointed out, to “get in the game”, she instead became a direct support professional. It’s a decision she has not once regretted.

“This is a once in a lifetime experience,” she explains. “Everything we do as DSPs makes a difference and changes lives.”

April has been working with Spurwink Services for almost seven years now. Her supervisor, Sue Murphy, a Senior Program Director with Spurwink, nominated El for this prestigious award. “Our program provides services to over fifty people with developmental disabilities, anywhere from their early 20s to mid-60s, and we care for people with a spectrum of abilities and challenges,” she explains. “Care requires intense personal attention, health and safety management, and dealing with communication issues.”

“April is able to work with a variety of people very well,” Murphy adds. “In fact, she’s worked with over half of the individuals in the program, equally well with everyone. For example, she worked with a very challenging person who came here from another agency in which very few people could work with him. She moved in with him 24/7, and got him to a place where he could access the community where he hadn’t before.”

Murphy goes on to explain that April is an extremely compassionate person, caring and flexible. “Because she’s so person-centered, she works well with the person’s personal strengths, challenging folks. She sees everyone’s potential and works with that. She comes in with a lot of optimism.”



April El, left, with NADD DSP Committee Chair Melissa Cheplic



Tuesdays are a typical day for April, as she begins at 8:00 in the morning, leaving Wednesday at 10:00 at night. “In those two days I go to a home to work with an individual who needs a routine. Getting him ready for his day, ready for his schedule, getting him out, which he never used to do,” she says. “It’s a constant

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routine. Not a lot of veering off the path for him unless you know him well, which I do. Still I try and stay with a strict schedule because it makes him comfortable.”

Outside of work, El loves to travel, often with her mother. And these travels take her around the world for new learning experiences. “My family is from Cambodia, and so Southeast Asia is a favorite place to see, and especially Vietnam. I learn something every time.”

April is often trusted to train employees, engaging in “job shadowing”, on-the-job instruction to help them adjust to many of the challenges of being a direct support professional. Spurwink has a work force of about 100 DSPs, all of which utilize the College of Direct Support (CDS) online curriculum when they come on board. “Between the job shadowing and the CDS curriculum, the staff is getting great training,” Sue notes.

April El’s work has had a remarkable impact, not only on the people she supports, but on her colleagues as well, which is one of the reasons Spurwink considers her such a remarkable asset, and an example for other DSPs. But, April notes, it’s a two-way street. “Our individuals have a much greater impact on my life than I do theirs,” she says. This “once in a lifetime experience” has certainly embodied her grandfather’s sage advice.

“I know when you invest time in people you change people’s lives by simply offering hope, love, and opportunity,” April says. “There are no limits to caring.”

CDS Partner Profiles

CDS Partner Profiles highlights the activities of state and local organizations that have integrated the College of Direct Support into efforts to elevate the preparation, performance, status and compensation of direct support professionals (DSPs) and frontline supervisors and managers (FSMs). The purpose of *CDS Partner Profiles* is to identify and describe a variety of innovative and exemplary initiatives and activities into which the CDS has been integrated. *CDS Partner Profiles* is written by leaders or organizations that are actually engaged in these efforts.

