

A Life of Choices

A Book of Stories



Institute on
Human Development
and Disability

The University of Georgia

Lois Curtis:

Give Lois Curtis pastels and a piece of paper and she goes instantly to work on creating folk art, using bright, sunny colors that reflect her cheery mood. Lois is happy when she's drawing, and when she has the chance to dress up in colorful styles that mirror the spirit in her art. Lois makes art look easy. Observers see her skills and share her creative enthusiasm. But Lois' life has been far from easy, and she has not always had people nearby to encourage her best traits.

Lois grew up in a public housing project in the shadow of a large penitentiary. Before her teen years she was diagnosed with severe mental disabilities, and from then until her mid-twenties she was shuttled among psycho-educational centers and psychiatric hospitals - places segregated and congregated by disability.

Institutions, hospitals, private care/boardings homes - yet wherever she went, Lois always remembered that her family loved her. She remembered the sewing skills her mother had taught her and she remembered that her grandmother had shown her how to clean and care for a home. Lois' dream was to live in her own apartment, somewhere near her family, and where people understood her and respected her as a person.

While still a teenager, Lois was introduced to Project Rescue and Atlanta Legal Aid who tried to find a permanent home for Lois near her family. Unfortunately, the community placements for Lois were not adequate and she was frequently institutionalized. But Lois still had one thing in her favor: her ability to make contact with people who might help her. She persisted in her efforts to call and invite the attorneys at Atlanta Legal Aid to free her from institutional shackles.

By the time Lois reached her late twenties, in 1995, Atlanta Legal Aid attorney Sue Jamieson filed a case in federal court on Lois' behalf, claiming the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits institutional placement if community-



based services can provide the supports needed. In a landmark decision in 1999, the Supreme Court ruled favorably: people who are needlessly segregated in institutions are victims of disability discrimination.

Lois is now enjoying the comfort of her own home with the aid of community-based services and the support of neighbors and friends. She has reconnected with her family - especially her sister, Patricia Curtis, and enjoys being with her nephew and niece. While her life has not been trouble-free since the Supreme Court decision, she has not been re-institutionalized.

With Lois' return to the community, it was appropriate that she would want to invest in the neighborhood by working or otherwise contributing her talents to help others who may not be as fortunate. A regular job? Lois' first step toward working was involvement in a statewide Independent Living Center grant administered by IHDD on customized employment. A vocational assessment highlighted her talents as an artist, writer, and her appreciation for apparel. It also brought out her long-term dream to work at a Target retail store.

Lois' ambition is now on track. With support from her Individualized Training Account and a Department of Labor-sponsored customized support team, she has started to produce and sell note cards illustrated with her art. Larger pieces of art have been framed and are available for sale. And, she is negotiating with a Target store for a carved part-time job.

Lois continues regular visits to the DOL Career Center to augment her skills and gain confidence for employment applications. She registers independently at the Career Center using a computer terminal, and practices counting money to foster her independence.

With the support of IHDD job coaches, she types on the computer keyboard to improve her writing abilities (she enjoys writing and receiving letters). And she also practices riding the county bus system, which will be her mode of transportation once the proposed Target job begins.

Along with her art, Lois has developed a passion for advocacy. "I want to tell everybody so people can get out" of institutions and nursing homes, she says.

Lois has particular pride in participating in quarterly Self Determination Team meetings. She has learned to use her voice to accent choice - the right of all people to make their own decisions. After each Self Determination Team meeting, she eagerly inquires when the next meeting will be held.

No wonder Lois has an easy smile; she's busy, working, and fortunate that the institutional setting is but a distant memory.



Lois was a frequent news media subject when she visited Washington, D.C., during the Supreme Court's "Olmstead" case.

Elaine Wilson:

Elaine Wilson is a consumer advocate. Almost from the time she left institutional living for good, she emphasized the power of words to change lives, create choice, and give hope to individuals stigmatized by mental illness. Her business card ("Elaine B. Wilson, Consumer Advocate") boldly stated her mission. Her words were firm yet warm, with a touch of wry humor, so that one knew she was a woman to embrace for her wisdom as much as for her humanity.

Today, Elaine's message is just as potent as when she left the institution. She still has her business card and her careful cadence of voice, but

she has added presentation skills to affect a wider audience of consumers, families, and professionals. Let's peek behind the scenes. . .

Elaine is sitting to one side of the screen showing a PowerPoint display, in a classroom at the University of Georgia. She sits comfortably in her power chair, with clothes and make-up complementing the professional environment. Aides adjust her microphone, the video camera is turned on, and the audience becomes quiet. The reassuring voice of her job coach breaks the stillness: "You may begin any time, Elaine."

Elaine glances at the title frame with those big, bold letters "The Olmstead Case - Elaine: Free at Last," takes a deep breath, and begins. "I have been on a long journey ..."



Elaine Wilson's journey of a lifetime has taken her from the geniality of her family home to multiple institutions and group homes. In every step of the way, she clung to a belief that some day, somewhere, she would have a place she could call "home" and be treated with dignity and respect. She now has that home - and the freedom to enjoy it - and her mission today describes the journey of her life so others may learn, and so service delivery systems may change.

The classroom scene at the University was the first rehearsal of Elaine's formal presentation on what life has been like for many people



Elaine practices her keyboard and computer skills at the Department of Labor's Career Center.

who have been shuttled among institutions without a thread of choice. Since the first rehearsal, Elaine has honed her delivery and presented to a variety of self-advocates and providers throughout Georgia. Though the audience may change, her message is the same: Keep talking until someone listens.

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From the time she was "free at last," Elaine has always wanted to share her story. She started by writing longhand drafts for a book, a laborious process that was the seed noted by the I Want a Job! staff when they first interviewed Elaine for inclusion in the project. Would Elaine want to take her goal a step further by creating a live presentation, for which she would receive a fee? Through her Individual Training Account a power chair was purchased to ease her mobility. Then her companions and coaches worked with her to polish the presentation and schedule the audiences.

Tasting the fruits of a new career, Elaine said she would *also* like to work as a receptionist. Again, companions and job coaches collaborated with the Department of Labor for training in keyboard skills, use of a computer, and how to access the Internet. Schedules were arranged to allow Elaine time for her dialysis requirements. She's almost ready for a carved employment opportunity appropriate for her skills and interests,

the needs of the employer, and with support from IHDD job coaches.

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Elaine's disability was caused by a high fever that she experienced during a serious illness when she was just an infant. She was institutionalized as a teenager and spent the next 29 years in 37 different facilities. In 1996 she joined Lois Curtis in the Olmstead case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in 1999 that "...unjustified isolation...is properly regarded as discrimination based on disability."

Since 1997, Elaine has lived in the community. Her first home, in which she lived for three years, challenged her mobility. She now lives in an apartment near Atlanta with support from companions who assist her with food preparation, decision-making, and transportation. Her companions are Elaine's extended family, helping her access the community while learning the gifts of an individual with a significant disability.

What Elaine has learned from her years in unnecessary segregation forms the gist of her many presentations. She suggests:

- **To People in Institutions -**

- Don't ever feel bad because you can't advocate for yourself
- Get a good support system
- Keep talking until someone listens

- **To Family/Friends -**

- Call, write and visit the person in the institution
- Call a lawyer in behalf of the person

- **To Lawyers -**

- Meet and talk with the person in the institution
- Listen, ask questions
- Help the person file a case

- **To Service Providers -**

- Take the person to a private place to talk
- Talk with family members
- Work on what the person wants
- Listen

- **To Government Officials —**

- Take the time, talk to individuals in institutions, and ask what they want
- And if none of this works, call Elaine. She will listen!

George Campbell:

Ask George Campbell if he is a catalyst, someone like the mayor of Clarkesville who shepherds the community to action, and he would smile and say "no." Yet George has brought the community together just by being himself - a friend to all, an example for youth to emulate, and a citizen who works through disability to achieve a favorable outcome.

George contributes to his community through a unique partnership in customized employment that involves educators, a utility company, and a community service provider, all supporting George's desire to work with school-age children.

"I like to go out with the kids on the bus and go to the library and work on the computer," he said. "I'm good to 'em and show 'em how to do their job so when they get a job themselves they know what to do."

Three days a week George works as a special education aide at Habersham Central High School. One day may involve job coaching students on lunchroom cleanup or setup for evening meals at two local churches. Another will see him playing basketball ("I can shoot and get 'em in every time") and walking the track with the students. And on Fridays, George and the students bake bread to sell within the school system. Any day, he's helping students

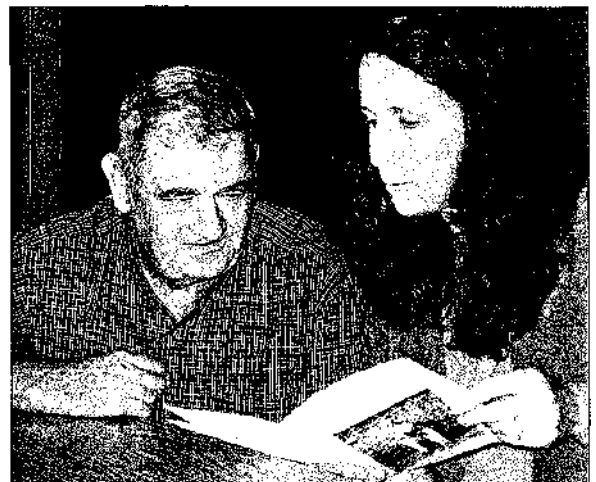


prepare for their futures in the community by showing how to perform a job with responsibility and good citizenship.

George's good work is a natural product of his upbringing on a farm in rural Georgia. He learned honest values by chopping wood, picking cotton with his siblings, and plowing fields behind a mule. He easily recognized the importance of family (he has 11 brothers and sisters) and commitment.

The partnership that established George's carved job with the Habersham County school system involves sponsorship of the aide's position by the Habersham Electric Membership Corporation, job coach services from Georgia Mountains Community Services, and equipment (computer, digital camera, and scanner) purchased through George's Individual Training Account by the Institute on Human Development and Disability.

After a history of institutionalization and sheltered workshops, George is living in his own apartment, working with students, and writing his second book (his first, *My Two Good Feet*, has sold more than 400 copies) - allowing his gift of compassion to break down barriers for all people with disabilities.



George supporting students in the classroom; at right, viewing the manuscript of his second book with Denise Eller of Georgia Mountains Community Services.

Lee Abercrombie:

One of the most insightful periods in the customized employment process occurs when the employment team meets with an individual with a significant disability to discover his or her strengths, abilities, interests, and preferences. It is a person-centered process to ensure that the individual and the information gathered drive employment planning.

An observation period follows in which the employment team and the individual visit together at home and in the community, learning more about experiences and pastimes and discovering natural supports that may be in place.

So when Lee Abercrombie revealed his "dream job" was to operate his own video game business, members of Lee's customized team began researching video game trends to determine the most profitable machines for him to own. His business plan was drafted with the help of staff and a national consultant, who continues to advise Lee on marketing and other business-related issues. A location was secured in the community at Royal Care Center, a multi-purpose facility where customers receive such services as haircuts and car washes. Lee has established Abercrombie Arcade in one room of the Center.

Through his Individual Training Account with the Institute on Human Development and Disability, Lee's initial purchase included two video games - one that offers both PacMan and Gallaga, and another that offers golf. He also purchased a business license, insurance, registration stickers for the machines, a cell phone, money belt, and a coin changer. Additional ITA funds have been expended to acquire a Sports Jam machine, sticker machine, and a bubble gum machine. His customized employment team is searching for other sources for money for additional machines, and is working with Lee to identify additional locations for him to establish Abercrombie Arcade. Eventually, Lee plans to invest profits back into his business to continue expansion.



Lee Abercrombie delights in his arcade business and looks forward to having more machines at additional locations.



Looking back, Lee realizes that he has come a long way from institutionalization, his decade in a sheltered workshop, and more recently as a bagger and stocker at two grocery stores. "I like having my own business," he says. "I have a pager and business cards."

Lee works about three hours per week checking, cleaning, and taking change out of his machines. As a bonus of employment, he spends more time out in the community. His parents, who have always supported Lee in his endeavors, note that he is now in a position to set a positive example for others with disabilities.

Dream job? Lee Abercrombie is living his dream through self-employment. It's real, achievable, and a gateway to business and personal growth.

Korey Marks:

Amidst the whoops and hollers of people having fun at the bowling alley, Korey Marks surveys the scene and admits "things are going pretty good." According to Korey, the more fun people have on the lanes, the more his business will grow.

Korey heads up Korey's Amusements, a unique entertainment business that developed from a partnership among people and agencies dedicated to customized employment for individuals with significant disabilities. The partnership includes a bowling alley proprietor, the local provider, and the Department of Labor-sponsored customized support team from the Institute on Human Development and Disability.



Korey's Amusements is an outgrowth of Korey's passion for video recording, video games, and his innate determination to succeed. A graduate of Stephens County High School in Toccoa, he had been on sheltered workshop crews for more than a decade but retained a desire to really contribute to his community through competitive employment.

One workshop assignment placed him on a Northstar Venture cleaning crew. Northstar works with Georgia Mountains Community Services to

provide personal care and employment assistance to people with significant disabilities. The crew worked regularly at the Roselane Bowling Alley, and even after this establishment changed owners, Korey continued his appreciation for the amusement business.

When Korey qualified for the IHDD's customized employment project, his support team discovered Korey's personal talents and his links to the bowling alley. Soon, a partnership evolved between Roselane's new owner, Roz Chandler, the IHDD, and Korey's support network.

Through Korey's Individual Training Account, a Dance Revolution game was purchased that has proven popular with bowling alley patrons. In fact, it is so popular that Korey plans to invest his profits to purchase additional video games and possibly several redeemable games that give back tickets so younger children may win prizes.

The ITA also enabled purchase of a video camcorder and a video system. The system includes a drop-down screen over the lanes, which can project images of people bowling, having fun at birthday parties, and other bowling team activities. The images are shot with Korey's camcorder, turning him into a videographer as well as an amusement game entrepreneur.

In addition, Korey manages Roselane's "Glow Bowl" segment in exchange for space for the video games. The "Glow Bowl," which runs on Friday and Saturday nights, targets teens and their love for loud music, blacklight, and bowling. Korey receives half the profits from the "Glow Bowl" evenings, providing another revenue source to purchase and expand his video game business.

Under consideration are Korey's plans for birthday packages for children and their families.

"Korey is a great guy," said Chandler. "He works so hard, and once he catches on to something, he's got it."

Korey likely agrees that he works hard. But hard work, and a profit, are only fair in a business that's fun.



Korey's dance revolution game is a hit with kids.

D.C. Dewberry;

Maybe the wag of a dog's tail telegraphs happiness and an expression of friendship. It's usually a sign of goodwill without pretense, a show of affection that may last longer than a flavored treat. Best of all, knowing that the dog is a happy critter reflects well upon the caregiver and may create a bond that benefits both.

D.C. doesn't need to expend a lot of words to convey his feeling for dogs. He likes taking care of them, and the dogs seem to enjoy being pampered by D.C. It's a win/win situation that goes well beyond the dogs and D.C. to affect the value of individuals with disabilities to their community and the concept of customized employment.

D.C. Dewberry's love of animals was unveiled in vocational profiling to discover his interests and abilities. He has always enjoyed taking care of pets at home and for friends. Though he had no prior experience in the grooming of pets, the motivation was obvious to his customized employment team.

Individual Training Account funds were used to purchase a "Three Arm Bandit" (a device to dry three dogs), hydraulic table, and Clipper Vac system that facilitates cleanup after shaving and clipping. A video that came with the equipment, and support by his job coach, helped D.C. understand the grooming procedure.

As D.C. learned to use the equipment, his job coach visited area groomers and veterinary offices to match D.C.'s training and equipment with a business needing grooming services. A resource-ownership arrangement was negotiated with Tim Brendel of Tender Loving Grooming, who was very receptive to working with D.C.

Three days per week, five hours per day, D.C. uses his equipment to perform grooming duties at Tender Loving Grooming. Other employees use the equipment on the days D.C. is not working. To



D.C. on the job at Tender Loving Grooming.

increase D.C.'s understanding of the grooming business, his job coach has worked with Mr. Brendel to develop on-job natural supports that D.C. will enjoy.

D.C. likes his work. His favorite part of the job is working directly with the animals ("I love the dogs," he says). And to accent this delight and his appreciation for working with Mr. Brendel, D.C. recently participated in an Entrepreneurial Fair hosted by Cobb Works and Kennesaw State University. He staffed a booth for Tender Loving Grooming, distributed pens imprinted with the business name, showed a loop of his training video, and explained his work to Fair participants.

Resource ownership has brought D.C. from activities with a day program to a new level of personal and community involvement. He lives in a personal care home, enjoys his work and the people he meets, and is always smiling.

And to think his new surroundings all began with a love of animals.



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