

CAU in the News

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Community Access Unlimited's mission is to provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.

CAU MEMBER FINDS BEING HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS REWARDING

Shawanna Hicks named Supportive Housing Tenant of the Year just one year after leaving DCP&P

Elizabeth, NJ – December 17, 2012 – Shawanna Hicks will have more than stockings on her mantle this Christmas. She also will proudly display the Supportive Housing Tenant of the Year award she recently received from the Supportive Housing Association of New Jersey (SHA).

SHA is a statewide, nonprofit organization serving people with special needs with the mission of promoting and maintaining a strong supportive housing industry in New Jersey. Hicks is a member of Community Access Unlimited (CAU), which supports people with disabilities and at-risk youth, including through supportive housing. She resides in a CAU-owned apartment through the agency's Supported Housing Program. Each year SHA presents the Supportive Housing Tenant of the Year award to an individual living in a supportive housing setting who has exemplified an outstanding tenant through their actions and support of fellow residents by: helping fellow tenants to live with stability, autonomy and dignity; advocating for the concept of supportive housing in the larger community; and acting as a role model for other tenants by achieving his or her individual goals.

Hicks was selected for this year's honor just one year after leaving the care of the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). Since joining CAU in 2010 she has made remarkable progress from reliance on DYFS to living independently and becoming a leader within her program and the entire CAU organization, according to Howard Wingard, CAU coordinator of supported housing, Transitional Opportunities Program.

Hicks lives in a three-bedroom apartment in Elizabeth with two roommates and is active in tenant advocacy within their complex and program, according to Wingard. She serves as president of CAU's Member Action Committee, which advocates for members within the agency, and Youth Advisory Board, which advocates for youth throughout the state, and has made frequent presentations at state and national conferences about succeeding in the child welfare system.

Hicks began volunteering in CAU's human resources department simply as a way to give back to the agency and help her fellow members, according to Wingard. She now works full time for the agency, part time in human resources and part time as an overnight support staff member in CAU's development disabilities program.

"I've seen her grow so much since she's been at Community Access," Wingard said. "She's a true peer. She advocates for her fellow members, making sure their needs are met and their concerns are heard. She's gone from volunteering to working full time yet she's still a member. She's able to balance the two."

The SHA award capped a whirlwind year of success for Hicks. She received two CAU awards, including Member of the Year, as well as the Youth Leadership of the Year Award from the New Jersey Alliance for children, Youth and Families.

In the spring she was selected to be among 30 recipients of wishes fulfilled by the nonprofit One Simple Wish as part of their "30 Wishes. 30 Cities. 30 Days." program. Hicks had wished for driving lessons so she could move into the full-time human resources position. Then CAU gave her a car through the agency's Vehicle Donation Program, which enables CAU members with special needs get to a job or school and live more self-sufficiently. Unlike other car donation programs, CAU does not take cars donated through the program and sell them. Donations go directly to the members with transportation needs.

"Everything's different now," Hicks said. "I get to visit my family more often. I never knew how much time you lose on the bus. It gives me more independence and makes me more productive in my career. It also helps me with my community work. I can make more meetings, travel to the different youth advisory boards in other counties and establish ties with them."

Yet despite all her success this year Hicks remains humble.

"Everything I do I do not to get recognition. I do it because it needs to get done," she said. "It's something you should want to do, to help people."

Hicks tries to infect her fellow members with that positive attitude.

"You've got to shine. You've got to reach for the stars," she said. "Community Access is not going to be here for you forever. Right now is the oldest you've ever been but also the youngest you will ever be. Take this experience and make it a benefit for you."