

For Immediate Release



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**DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AWARENESS MONTH CELEBRATED YEAR-ROUND
BY MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY ACCESS UNLIMITED**

March focuses attention on their every-day challenges and achievements

Elizabeth, NJ – March 9, 2012 – March is national Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, a time when Americans are asked to pay greater attention to both the needs and potential of people with developmental disabilities. However, to the members of Community Access Unlimited with developmental disabilities, life with both its challenges and achievements is a year-round celebration.

“It is wonderful that Americans are asked to raise their awareness of the needs and accomplishments of people with disabilities during the month of March,” said Sid Blanchard, executive director of Community Access Unlimited (CAU). “Yet for our members Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month is a month-long celebration of what they achieve 12 months a year.”

CAU provides support services to people with disabilities and at-risk youth that enable members to live independently within the community, including housing, vocational training, recreation and overall support.

Perhaps no need for a fulfilled life is greater than housing and CAU provides safe assisted, semi-independent and independent living for its members with disabilities through more than 200 properties within communities throughout Union County.

CAU member Ashley Lasanta laughs as she drives her wheelchair across the large living room of her new home in Westfield and breathes in that new-house smell.

“I love it here,” Lasanta said. “I love the staff. I feel safe here. It’s more than I expected. I didn’t expect it to be this big.”

CAU members enjoy the pleasure and benefits of employment while also contributing to the community through payroll and income taxes and consumerism. Brian Simmonelli recently celebrated 25 years working at DureX Incorporated in Garwood, a metal stamp and sheet fabrication business, earning a \$1,500 bonus.

“I like the people and my work,” he said. “We kid around a lot. Everyone gets along really well. Plus I get four weeks of vacation and money that I put right in the bank.”

Said Robert Denholtz, president and CEO of DureX, “He’s a loyal employee, he’s reliable, he’s here every day. We’re happy to have him.”

Because recreation also is important to a fulfilled life CAU is happy to have a partnership with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) Venturing program. Venturing is a youth development program open to both young men and women intended to help members mature, develop skills and advance their knowledge.

Recognizing the benefits of group membership and interaction, CAU worked with local BSA representatives to create a Venturing crew for its members who have developmental disabilities. Venturing provides social skill training, skill-building activities and enables members to learn what being part of a group or a team means, according to Blanchard.

"We get to go on scavenger hunts, hiking and do arts and crafts," said CAU member Joyce Cargle. "We learn about safety in the community and all about nature. And I like to hang out with the members. I was in Girl Scouts but it wasn't the same. We learn more now."

There may be no better recreation than romance and CAU members find plenty of that, as well, according to Blanchard. Each year the agency hosts a Couple Night for members who have found their soul mates.

"While people with disabilities sometimes struggle to achieve their rights to respect, independence and self-sufficiency, they usually find falling in love as natural a process as does everyone else in the world," Blanchard said.

Christine and Lee Bongiovi, who both are people with disabilities, have been married for more than 10 years. But it was not love at first sight.

"We were an odd couple at first," Lee said. That lasted right up until the wedding.

"He dropped my ring and it fell in front of my mother," Christine said. "Everyone was teasing him because they thought he was going to marry my mother."

Today the Bongiovis have a 9-year-old son, Justin.

"In declaring March Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month in 1987 President Reagan encouraged all Americans to offer their fellow citizens with disabilities both encouragement and opportunities to achieve their full potential," Blanchard said. "Yet 25 years later we are witnessing an attack on government support for people with disabilities such as Medicaid, more than 2,500 New Jersey residents continue to live in developmental centers, or institutions, instead of in the community and less than 30 percent of employers surveyed have a program or policy in place regarding hiring people with disabilities.

"Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month offers an opportunity to focus on the challenges and achievements of people with disabilities. But I encourage people to remember those challenges and achievements every day, all year long."

About CAU

Community Access Unlimited (CAU), celebrating its 33rd anniversary in 2012, supports people with special needs in achieving real lives in the community. CAU provides support and gives a voice to adults and youth who traditionally have had little support and no voice in society. CAU helps people with housing, life skills, employment, money management, socialization and civic activities. CAU also supports opportunities for advocacy through training in assertiveness, decision-making and civil rights. CAU serves more than 5,000 individuals each year. For more information about CAU and its services, contact us by phone at 908.354.3040, online at www.caunj.org or by mail at 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202.