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News Release

West Oak Lane Woman Overcomes Adversity, Honored for Outstanding Contributions as a Disabled Worker

Dedicated employee gets award from Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped (PIBH)

PHILADELPHIA, PA – West Oak Lane resident Carmella Smith, 38, has raised two teenage children and is a dedicated employee and excellent performer in her full-time job. These accomplishments may seem ordinary, but they are remarkable for Smith, who has been totally blind since the age of seven. Smith has overcome tremendous adversity to be honored this Friday, August 1, 2003 as a Disabled Worker of the Year by the Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped (PIBH).

Smith is a customer service representative for InspiriTec, a call center for Pennsylvania residents that have questions about their utility service and payments. She takes down their information in Braille, and then enters and verifies a customers' information using a regular keyboard and computer, fashioned with an audio device that allows her to hear what she's typing. Callers are often distressed, but Smith lends a sympathetic ear to their troubles, especially because she herself is no stranger to struggle.

"Carmella has overcome challenging obstacles and incredible odds to do outstanding work for us, and we are proud to celebrate her accomplishments and honor her with this award" said Al Baker, President and CEO of PIBH. "She is a true role model for those who have disabilities and those who do not. Her story of courage should serve as an inspiration to all of us," he added.

Smith faced adversity at an early age when she developed Still's Disease, a rare form of rheumatoid arthritis, which resulted in complete blindness. Her difficulties continued as she tried to enter the workforce, relying on her good skills and incredible motivation to overcome her disability and give back to society. After 60 job interviews and trying to persuade employers that she could do the same job as a sighted person if she just got the chance, Smith nearly gave up hope.

Finally, an employee from InspiriTec, a PIBH member agency, called Smith to tell her about an opportunity for training and employment at its Philadelphia call center. It was an ideal job, allowing Smith to use her computer and communication skills.

“That call was a blessing,” says Smith. “Now I work for an employer who knows what blind people can do. InspiriTec and PIBH exist in order to help me succeed. I am so excited to receive this award.”

Smith has proved that people with disabilities can excel in the workforce if only given a chance to work. She has a 99 percent accuracy rate in her job, far above many sighted people doing the same work. She is being honored as a runner up for the Nettie Mann Achievement Award, given annually to employees with disabilities who embody an attitude of independence and dedication. A special ceremony is being held in her honor Friday, August 1st at the InspiriTec call center at 340 North 12th Street (at Callowhill Street) at 6:00 p.m.

During the ceremony, Baker will present Smith with a \$100 cash gift and a personalized plaque inscribed with the details of the award.

The unemployment rate for disabled individuals is a staggering 72 percent in Pennsylvania, which amounts to approximately 248,500 people with disabilities who are unemployed, compared to 6.7 percent for the non-disabled population. While many of the jobs performed by disabled workers require minimal skills, they in some cases demand extraordinary effort to complete because of the workers' disabilities. Many disabled workers are role models for those who have disabilities and those who do not. There are countless stories of courage. They value their employment and appreciate the independence it affords them. Disabled individuals who work rely less on social services and contribute to the economy. Employment is a powerful tool in helping individuals achieve more fulfilled and meaningful lives.

About PIBH

PIBH is the central non-profit agency in Pennsylvania solely dedicated to increasing employment opportunities for disabled individuals. In 2002, PIBH helped employ over 4,000 Pennsylvanians with disabilities. PIBH works on behalf of its 86 member agencies to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities through government relations, marketing and sales.

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