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News Release

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Michigan Commission for the Blind Honors Clients, Employers, & Community Partners

January 24, 2008 – Twelve individuals and organizations received Honor Roll Awards from the Michigan Commission for the Blind (MCB) on Monday, December 10, 2007, at the MCB commission meeting at the Kellogg Center, Michigan State University. The statewide awards are presented annually to:

- 1.) Michigan Commission for the Blind clients selected for their excellence as role models achieving their goals for employment and/or independent living after vision loss,
- 2.) employers of MCB clients, and
- 3.) community partners recognized for their ongoing collaboration with MCB.

Each person present at the ceremony received an engraved plaque. Honorees unable to attend the ceremony participated by teleconference and will receive their plaques individually at a later date. Below are the 2007 award recipients, including photos of the nine present at the December ceremony:

1. ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS *(photos available upon request)*

Mercedes Bell (no photo available) of **Republic** (Marquette County) was discouraged when she first lost her vision, wondering how she could continue traveling, reading, cooking, and all her activities of daily life at home. MCB helped her to adjust to her loss of vision at a week-long Mini Adjustment Seminar in Escanaba—one of several held each year at various locations around the state. During the seminar and afterward, MCB staff helped her learn to use a cane and find her way on foot and with public transportation. Through her own persistence, she's now a skilled traveler. This past summer, Mrs. Bell traveled alone by bus from Republic to Clare and back to Republic. She also enjoys cooking again, using new skills that she learned through the MCB Independent Living Program to work confidently and safely in her kitchen.

Lillian Knoll (no photo available) of **Holland** (Allegan County) is known for her endless drive and determination to keep active and keep working. Throughout her experience with vision loss, she has had to adjust to several different eye conditions that affected each eye differently. When she first became involved with the MCB Vocational Rehabilitation Program, she learned skills of blindness, computer skills including e-mail, and how to use adaptive devices such as magnifiers, a large print calendar, and on-screen computer magnification software. Then, based on her interest in selling jewelry and other items, she worked with an MCB instructor to learning how to purchase and sell items on eBay. She believed she could start a business and, with a lot of hard work, she did. At age 77, in addition to her home-based business, she is an active member of her condo complex.

Michael Reese of **Canton** (Wayne County) is currently employed as an information technology specialist (computer programmer) for the Internal Revenue Service. He came to MCB for training in skills of deafblindness in order to continue his current employment. Throughout his training in the MCB Vocational Rehabilitation Program, he has maintained his determination, sense of humor, and positive attitude even as deteriorating vision and hearing threatened his livelihood. He attended the residential MCB Training Center in Kalamazoo for five weeks to improve his Braille literacy, orientation and mobility, and computer skills, and his rapid progress constantly challenged his instructors to keep providing more advanced material. He has continued with correspondence classes through the Hadley School for the Blind, including calculus “for fun,” and in the future he would like to teach mathematics courses for Hadley in addition to his job with the IRS.



Michael Reese

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Diana Schmitthausler of **Lansing** (Ingham County) was skeptical at first of how much she could accomplish as a person with impaired vision. When she first started with MCB's Independent Living Program, she worked with an MCB rehabilitation teacher in her home and became proficient at labeling clothing and food packages and cooking simple meals. Eventually she agreed to try the residential MCB Training Center "only for one week—no more!" She changed her mind and stayed from September to Christmas break. When she returned home, she was once again an active member of her community. She goes to the local gym, and she enjoys bowling. She gardens, paints ceramics, does macramé, and volunteers at the Michigan Rehabilitation Council. When asked what surprised her the most about the whole adjustment process to being blind, she responded by saying, "I never thought I'd get out like other people, have a good time, and go bowling again." She is considering using her craft talents to start a business selling her works through a microenterprise business.



Diana Schmitthausler

Ruta Sharangpani of **Plymouth** (Wayne County) became a client of MCB in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program when she was in high school. MCB provided training in skills of blindness and personal adjustment. She also attended the MCB College Prep Program at the MCB Training Center in Kalamazoo. After graduating from high school, she earned a bachelor's degree from Michigan State University in biology, graduating as one of the top students in her class. Her vocational goal was to be a physician. She went to medical school at Wayne State University, where she earned her MD degree with a specialty in internal medicine. She was employed at the Detroit Medical Center as an internist, and she is currently pursuing a master's degree in public health. Her goal is to work in the public health field.



Dr. Ruta Sharangpani

Patricia Wagner of **Portage** (Kalamazoo County), age 74, has achieved a high level of independence through her own hard work and help from the MCB Independent Living Program. She's learned to use Braille for reading and labeling, an electronic device that identifies canned goods by scanning the bar codes, an electronic talking color identifier for clothing and other items, a talking microwave oven, a digital voice recorder for appointments and notes, and a computer with JAWS talking screen-reader software to use e-mail and the Internet. She is currently attending the residential MCB Training Center to improve her orientation and mobility skills (including using a cane, finding her way indoors and outdoors, using public transportation, and related skills). She is an active member of the local visually impaired seniors' support group and a member of the board of directors of the Michigan Foundation for the Blind and Visually Impaired. She also participates in fundraising activities for the Kalamazoo Junior Symphony.



Patricia Wagner

2. EMPLOYER AWARDS (photos available upon request)

Fazoli's (no photo available) of **Battle Creek** (Calhoun County) has employed an MCB client who is totally blind for three years as a dishwasher. General Manager Beth Rapp contacted MCB for assistance when she and the employee became interested in expanding the job to include additional duties, skills, and responsibilities such as portioning ingredients and making sauces. This required some basic adaptive equipment, such as a talking scale, and MCB is working to find the needed items. Rapp took the initiative to utilize the employee's skills and expand the job so that the restaurant would have a more productive worker and the employee would earn a higher income with more hours. She has been an excellent facilitator to make this happen.

StelterPartners of **Grand Rapids** (Kent County) is a manufacturer of educational furniture and other products. Early in the company's collaboration with MCB, President/Owner James Stelter took time to visit the MCB Grand Rapids office to meet staff and discuss the needs of his business and how MCB could work with him to provide employment opportunities to qualified MCB clients. He provided a welcoming environment for MCB clients and invited MCB staff to his business to check for physical barriers or other potential problems. Over the past three years, StelterPartners has hired three MCB clients in accounting, reception, and shipping and handling.



James Stelter, President & Owner
& Jackie Boomstra, employee

(more)

Tank-Automotive Research, Development, and Engineering Center (TARDEC), National Automotive Center, United States Army, of Warren (Macomb County) has provided adaptive tools for an MCB client employed as a co-op chemist there, including a notebook computer and adaptive software. Staff at TARDEC have been very helpful in quickly resolving problems related to the adaptive equipment. TARDEC is also paying college tuition for the employee, who will graduate next year with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. Both the employer and the employee are very pleased with the mutually beneficial employment opportunity.



Pat Muzzell of TARDEC

3. COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARDS

Community Choices of Westland (Wayne County) provides supported employment for individuals with severe and multiple disabilities, including some MCB clients, who experiences difficulties finding other employment. As an example, Community Choices received one referral of an MCB client who had worked with numerous supported employment agencies over the past five years with no success of finding stable employment. Community Choices was able to match his needs. Community Choices has an excellent staff who understood many other dynamics affecting his goals for employment. As a team, Community Choices staff collaborated with family members, other service providers, and the Michigan Commission for the Blind to offer continued support and to help develop a plan for services that would help him reach his goals. Community Choices staff were diligent in their efforts to find employment while coaching and teaching him effective communication and job-seeking skills. He has achieved new literacy skills, and he is now employed as an office assistant.



Colleen Dahl & Waverly Williams II of Community Choices

Jennifer Graham, Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist (COMS), of Grand Rapids (Kent County), formerly of Williamston (Ingham County), has proven time after time to be a valuable team partner in providing outstanding orientation and mobility instruction services to MCB clients and their employers. She demonstrates the utmost in professionalism as well as an acute awareness of the additional community resources that may be helpful to her clients. As an example, in working with one MCB client who did not have the skills needed to use public transportation or cross streets on her own, Ms. Graham worked quickly to provide instruction at times that accommodated the individual's work schedule. She went to the employment site to assess potential barriers, developed travel routes, and worked with the employer and staff.



Jennifer Graham

Mid Michigan Industries (MMI) of Mt. Pleasant (Isabella County) is a full-service community rehabilitation agency. MCB staff have had a working relationship with Mid Michigan Industries for approximately 30 years. For the past eight years MMI's Mt. Pleasant staff have provided strong support to MCB for job development and placement. MMI job development staff have always been enthusiastic and helpful in working with MCB clients referred to them. Some MMI staff have even spent time at the MCB Training Center to develop their knowledge of blindness.



Andi Christopher of MMI

The Michigan Commission for the Blind provides opportunities for individuals who are blind to achieve independence and/or employment, annually serving more than 4,500 state residents who are blind or visually impaired. For more information, visit the website at www.michigan.gov/mcb or call toll-free at 1-800-292-4200 (voice) or 1-888-864-1212 (TTY).

The Michigan Commission for the Blind is part of the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth (DLEG), which is investing in Michigan's future by helping to create the jobs of today and tomorrow, ensuring that our children and adults have the skills these jobs demand, making Michigan a better place to do business, and training and placing those who need jobs now. For more information about DLEG, visit the department's website at www.michigan.gov/dleg.