

Older worker is a shining light

Deborah Blake had a dream to take care of herself and her husband by gaining good solid paying employment. And now that hope has become reality for her and more.

She and her husband came to Alaska in 2006 to spend more time with the grandchildren. Dennis, her husband, had always provided for the family, but now he had a debilitating disease and could not do the work he was accustomed to. Deborah knew in her heart it was her turn to provide for the family. Unfortunately, Deborah hadn't worked in the past 10 to 15 years. She hadn't even turned on a computer and was wracked with doubts. Luckily, she said, "I found the Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training (MASST) program and my employment journey started."

That was two years ago. This year, Deborah's commitment to work and community service is being honored with the Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training Older Worker of the Year Award for 2013.

In Interior Alaska, the MASST program is administered by Adult Learning Programs of Alaska, a non-profit community based organization that has been helping people reach their educational, individual, and career goals since 1975. The MASST program, federally known as the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), provides training and part-time paid job training positions for low-income individuals age 55 and older. The program helps Alaska retain the valuable resources of older workers while enabling older workers to maintain an independent lifestyle and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Mature Alaskans receive assistance with job skills training, job search training, and placement into unsubsidized employment while in the program.

Deborah is like many people over 55. They have highly sought after experience and skills, and their work ethic is unparalleled. They are dependable, reliable, have tremendous focus and attention, and enjoy being a productive part of the work force at any level.

Once a person is determined eligible for MASST, employment goals are discussed. It's important to know what a person will enjoy doing in their later years for work, and it helps to match what host agency the individual should be placed in for their skills training. Deborah received her skills training primarily by working in community host agencies. Host agencies are community service assignments in public or non-profit agencies such as hospitals, senior centers, government agencies, and Native Alaskan and tribal organizations. While placed in host agencies, older workers expand their skills and at the same time earn income. It's an earn while you learn assignment. In addition, the MASST program utilizes Adult Learning Programs of Alaska's many adult education resources as well as the Department of Labor resources at Job Centers across the state. Computer and Customer Service classes, GED preparation and testing, ALEX system training, resume writing and interview workshops are all available to participants.

Many older workers find the computer classes extremely beneficial to prepare them for work in today's computer driven businesses.

Deborah was chosen for the award from a pool of older workers across the Interior of Alaska. Her selection was based on her dependability, ability to work with others, and her dedication to her job. Under the purview of the MASST program, Deborah has held training assignments at the Alaska Court System and Alaska Legal Services, working for the Office Manager Angie Aragon. "She has been such a wonderful benefit to our office we just hated to see her move on. Deborah performed jobs here that took great attention to detail and she did them all with amazing accuracy. We just loved her", said Aragon.

It is easy to see why Deborah is so successful in life. Deborah's philosophy is to stay active. She says, "Sitting around makes you old; I have a lot of living to do." And that's very apparent in her work style. Deborah is always racing around trying to help co-workers anyway she can. Recently, Deborah has been hired by the Eye Clinic of Fairbanks as a receptionist. Those of us who know her realize they have gained an outstanding employee.

Deborah is a shining light for what the MASST program can accomplish. She's a hard-working lady who is a pleasure to be around. She has made significant contributions to both of her host agencies and to the Fairbanks community.

This year's selection process was difficult because all MASST workers are dependable, hard working, and bring a sense of experience into the workplace. As the program manager for MASST, I have seen firsthand the qualities older workers bring into organizations and Deborah is no exception. Deborah was chosen because she went above and beyond in her training and work ethic in both of her host agencies. George Washington Carver once said, "When you endeavor to do common things in an uncommon manner, the world will pay attention to you." The State of Alaska's MASST program definitely noticed Deborah and presented her this award for stellar performance and dedication to community service.

I highly encourage businesses and employers to consider older workers for possible positions. The MASST program provides a win-win situation. Nonprofit agencies or government entities obtain temporary help while at the same time mature Alaskans receive the skills they need to go on to unsubsidized employment.

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