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Man Works to Prove He Is More than His Disability

Dayton, Ohio: Jeff T. is an exceptional person. He quotes verbatim from his collection of over 2000 books, fixes video and audio equipment to gift to neighbors, believes in a hard day's work and a job well done, discusses economics, politics and society, enjoys movies and music (he prefers do-wop over today's music) and is one of the most polite people you'll ever meet. And he battles mental illness daily.

Jeff has worked at Eastway for 22 years and is one of the most responsible workers Fred Willis has supervised. Jeff mostly paints for the nonprofit corporation, but has also done small maintenance and clean-up jobs. His job is very much a part of him; he says, "I like to work; I have to work." One wishes more people had Jeff's drive; he focuses on being "prompt, neat, clean, polite, and helpful."

Even with all these desirable qualities, because of his disability, Jeff had not worked more than odd jobs previously. He may get anxious in some situations and may talk to himself when the office gets very quiet, but he is aware of the symptoms of his illness. Jeff says of Eastway, "Here I can do the job." Offering additional support and medical services, Eastway is a stabilizing force for Taylor.

Willis calls Jeff a "self-starter" stating, "once we lay out the jobs, I don't have to check on him to see if he's doing the job." Jeff appreciates the trust and works hard to earn the respect of his colleagues, believing that a job well-done speaks for itself. His parents instilled a strong respect for a full day of work; he explains that "laziness of any kind, I abhor."

Willis believes that there is "no typical pattern that describes Jeff." He doesn't look you in the eye during conversation and he may get anxious, but he has stories to tell and a giving spirit that people may overlook. In conversation, Jeff uses words that speak to his depth of character – words like "accountability," "respect," "obligation" and "a sense of purpose." Unfortunately, too many people can't see past the disability to appreciate the experience and kindness of the man underneath.

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His intellect and memory is fantastic; in conversation, he will quote from his many books or make connections between today's social influences and those of history. He remembers conversations with co-workers, and each Christmas gives gifts specific to their needs – whether it is a video-taped copy of a favorite movie or a tool to replace one that was lost or broken. Willis and his colleague Mary Flores never have to search out information for paint colors at Eastway's many buildings; Jeff knows every color in every room and will remind them when it's time to order a different color.

Mary Flores has worked with Eastway since early 2002. She says that for many of the clients who find employment support through Eastway, a steady job helps them feel like “whole human beings.” Flores tells stories of clients who had full time jobs before they developed mental illness; the stability of the job at Eastway provides structure and allows them to contribute to their environment and their own recovery.

Willis explains that Jeff has been “marginalized by people who don't take the time to get to know him.” Eastway has been working in the community for over 50 years to provide counseling, medication, housing, and employment for the mentally ill in the region. However, even with a steady job, a supportive case worker, and a safe housing environment, he faces the stigma of his disability daily. Eastway continues to serve clients in a comprehensive fashion, but showing a little human dignity to people who appear to be different is up to each of us as individuals.

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Eastway is the largest, private, not-for-profit provider of mental health, substance abuse, housing, employment and educational services in the Miami Valley area. Eastway serves adults, children and families throughout Montgomery County and beyond – teaching people the life skills they need to take care of themselves – instilling HOPE by providing people with the opportunity to lead fulfilled lives, to feel wanted, productive, safe, secure and loved.

Eastway is a partner with the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board for Montgomery County and the Family and Children First Council of Montgomery County.