

AbilityOne Program Employees Share Their Stories through Speakers Bureau

AbilityOne Program employees are spreading the word about the AbilityOne Program through NISH's new AbilityOne Speakers Bureau. Through this program, NISH staff members assist participants with writing and practicing their speeches, as well as with securing speaking opportunities. Participants then share their stories with federal customers, potential federal customers and others. Their message is loud and clear: "Think AbilityOne first."

To date, AbilityOne Program employees have presented at nearly two dozen events, such as:

- Several National Contract Management Association (NCMA) conferences and chapter meetings
- Defense Contract Management Agency Commander's Conference
- National Disability Employment Awareness Month event held at the Pentagon
- Department of Defense (DoD) Senior Leadership Procurement Retreat
- Air Combat Command Conference
- Air Force Space Command 2008
- DoD Procurement Conference
- National Postal Forum
- NISH and National Council of Work Centers conferences

Additional speaking engagements are scheduled throughout the remainder of 2008. There are currently six AbilityOne Program employees, including two U.S. veterans, participating in the Speakers Bureau. Here are their stories.

Nathan Short **PCSI** **Austin, Texas**

After graduating from U.S. Army Basic Training, Nathan Short spent more than three years stationed at Ft. Sill in Southern Oklahoma, where he drove trucks of ammunition and other supplies. In December 2002—just eight months after the birth of his son, Spencer—Short received orders to go to Iraq.

While stationed at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, Short was responsible for picking up trucks off the ships and monitoring the Mobile Tracking System, which tracks convoys and provides secure communication. After a tumor was discovered in Short's ankle a couple of months later, he returned home on leave. Determined to finish what he started, Short volunteered to return to Iraq and, in February 2004, was stationed in Truckville in Kuwait. There, he ran missions to Iraq, trucking supplies between ports and camps.

On April 20, 2004, while returning from Iraq to Truckville, the truck Short was riding in was involved in a major accident after camels crossed the road in front of another vehicle. The accident left Short with intestinal, wrist, hip, foot and ankle injuries, as well as nerve damage that caused "drop foot," which means he cannot raise his foot at the ankle. Short returned home in a wheelchair, but learned to walk again late that same year.

At the age of 25, Short secured medical retirement from the Army and began searching for a job. He did a brief stint at a factory and later counseled kids with substance abuse problems at a group home. However, it was challenging for Short to find the right



Nathan Short

match for his skills, interests and abilities. That all changed when Short joined PCSI (Professional Contract Services, Inc.) as the Registered Equipment Management System (REMS) monitor for Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma. In this position, Short prepares trucks for shipping—the same trucks he previously worked with on the receiving end.

"I can tell you that the day I started working on an AbilityOne contract was one of the most important days in my career," Short said. "What this act of Congress [Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act] means to me, is that if my leg is hurting, it's fine with my supervisor if I get up and move around... They are flexible when I have to go to doctors appointments to get new braces and things. These accommodations have made me successful at my job."

Short and his wife, Courtney, purchased a new house in Mustang,

Okla. last year. They both work to support Spencer, now five.

In a recent speech, Short said, “To all of you who have ever awarded an AbilityOne contract in the past, thank you on behalf of myself and all AbilityOne employees. And, please remember to think AbilityOne first.”

Frederick “Will” Williams TRDI Killeen, Texas

“On Sept. 18, 2004 at approximately 3:40 p.m., my life, as I knew it, would never be the same,” began Frederick Williams, Sgt. First Class, U.S. Army (Ret.). “My patrol and I were escorting an Iraqi engineer to survey a bridge that needed construction work. Two other soldiers and I returned to the vehicle to radio in for further instructions. I heard a blast and saw a huge fireball heading toward us.”

A suicide bomber had just attacked William’s patrol stationed in Baghdad, supporting Operation Iraqi freedom. He served as a convoy escort and managed a team of 14 soldiers in

escorting dignitaries through the war zone. Williams sustained major injuries in the attack. Today, a piece of shrapnel remains in his head between a nerve and an artery—a constant reminder of the bombing. As a result of injuries to his leg, Williams uses a cane and is unable to stand for long periods. He has memory loss and suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Williams began his career in the Army in 1983 as an Air Defenseman and Radar Technician. His career led him to support the U.S. Army in Ft. Carson, Colo.; Schofield Barracks, Hawaii; Ramstein, Germany; Camp Hovi, Korea; and Osan, Korea. In 2000, Williams served as an Air Defense Liaison for the Army First Cavalry Division. He coordinated deployed troops to protect the White House and

Pentagon, and was involved in supporting President Bush’s trips to his Crawford, Texas ranch.

After 23 years of service, and a year and eight months after the attack, Williams retired from the Army.

He began seeking a job to help him support his family—his wife, Liz, and their three daughters, including one with special needs. But, with all of his injuries, that proved to be a challenge.

“I was constantly waiting for that phone call that would allow me to provide for my family again and seven months later, I got that phone call,” said Williams, referring to the day he secured a job with Training Rehabilitation & Development Institute (TRDI). He is now employed monitoring security cameras for the airfields at Fort Hood, Texas, ensuring that the runway is safe for aircraft operation.

“It’s not like my job monitoring through satellites and radars, but it pulls from the skills I have. I am lucky enough to work in an environment that limits the amount of interaction I have with others, so that my post traumatic stress is in check, and I have accommodations for my physical disabilities as well. I work along with the finest people who can relate to what I have gone through, too. We feel like a family.”

“He seized the opportunity, came in one day ready to perform, took his job seriously and began helping out his fellow employees. Within a year, we were considering him for management positions because of his supervisory abilities and for the way he performed his job—always with an excellent attitude. For us, he was the model person for the AbilityOne Program,” said Mark Ramirez, director of contracts & operations at TRDI.

During a recent presentation, Williams expressed appreciation to Barry Barnett, contracting officer for the Directorate of Contracting at Fort Hood, Texas, and his staff, for awarding the AbilityOne Program contract at Fort Hood. “Because they put that pen to paper and went with AbilityOne, a career soldier who was robbed of the things most of us take for granted, was given a second chance to serve his country. I do so proudly.”



Frederick Williams

Mark Gilmore **Challenge Enterprises** **Green Cove Springs, Florida**

For Mark Gilmore, working for Challenge Enterprises could not be a better fit. As a person who has always known that he could do more, Gilmore not only accepts new challenges but also looks for them.

Growing up in Orange Park, Fla., Gilmore attended the local middle school and high school with his sister. While taking Special Education classes, Gilmore made room for the Drama club and starred as Ward Cleaver in the school's production of *Leave it to Beaver*. After earning a special diploma in 1987, Gilmore started on his career path by working for Challenge Enterprises.

"I started working the warehouse," Gilmore explained. "I did that job for a while. Then, they wanted me to explore new options. They offered me a new job. I said, 'yes.'"

Throughout his time with Challenge Enterprises, Gilmore has continued to strive and challenge himself. He has worked at the local Naval Air Station doing recycling and landscaping, and also worked on a tree farm. Currently, Gilmore works as a janitor at the U.S. Federal Courthouse in Jacksonville, Fla. For the past seven years, he has maintained his duties washing windows, vacuuming and dusting the judges' chambers. He has many friends on the job and that is what he likes best about going to work. He gives people the respect they deserve and has garnered it right back in return.

Through this job, Gilmore has learned that, "I have the ability to do anything they need." What is more, he has learned that he has the ability to do anything he puts his mind to.

On his way to church one Sunday, Gilmore noticed a dark brown house on a corner. He did not love the color but he loved the house immediately and set out to own it with the help of Challenge Enterprises. Challenge Enterprises also organized a group of



Mark Gilmore with Nancy Keating, CEO, Challenge Enterprises

college students to repaint Gilmore's house with the colors he selected—white with blue trim. After living with his parents until the age of 25 and then a series of roommates, Gilmore is one proud homeowner. He takes pride in the fact that he can mow his own lawn, do the laundry, clean or not clean the place at his will, and that he has his own gym and home office. Most importantly, he has his own privacy.

Gilmore is also an active member of the Special Olympics and an avid bowler. Gilmore has been involved with the Special Olympics since the age of 10 and is currently a member of the Input Council as well as an active competitor, primarily in bowling. Being part of the Input Council puts Gilmore in the position to tell others how much fun it is to participate in the Special Olympics. Gilmore won first place in the State games in bowling a couple of years ago.

Gilmore states that it is very important to him to be independent and do things on his own. He truly values and appreciates all the opportunities that Challenge Enterprises and the AbilityOne Program have offered him. In a recent speech, Gilmore said, "My job is important to me because I earn

money to pay my bills... My job and my house are very special to me."

Gilmore continued, "I am only one person. But there are 45,000 people helped by the AbilityOne program every year. We are all thankful. What you do helps us very much."

Belinda Porras **Department of Veterans Affairs,** **VA Medical Center** **Employment Source** **Fayetteville, North Carolina**

When Belinda Porras' marriage foundered eight years ago, she needed to find a job fast or faced losing custody of her two children. Born with spina bifida, Porras had limited mobility and few job skills.

"I thought I was unemployable," said Porras. "No one—not my parents or teachers—had ever encouraged me to have a career. It was simply assumed that I would always be taken care of by my family." Porras was born in the 1960s when little was known about treating children born with severe physical disabilities such as spina bifida.

Like so many other challenges in her life, Porras approached

her circumstances head-on with determination and hard work. She enrolled in computer classes and sent out dozens of resumes. But, when she did succeed in getting job interviews, she recalled, “people looked at me differently and I never got a call back.”

As the bills piled up, Porras grew discouraged and frightened. Then, she



Belinda Porras

read an article in a North Carolina newspaper about Employment Source of Fayetteville, a nonprofit agency (NPA) that helps people with disabilities get work. She called the agency and the very next day she began a part-time job making identification cards (ID) at the Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center in Fayetteville. Eight months later, she applied for a full-time job there as a telephone switchboard operator. Highly intelligent and super-organized, Porras was quickly recognized for her abilities and was rewarded with promotion after promotion.

“I can tell you that the day I started working on an AbilityOne contract was one of the best and most important days in my life and it was instrumental in giving me the tools that I needed to take control of my own life,” Porras said. “The AbilityOne Program allowed me to keep my family together,

to have a place to live and to be able to raise my children independently.”

In 2002, Porras graduated out of the AbilityOne Program into a managerial position. Today, she oversees the entire VA Medical Center AbilityOne Program operation—a job that comes with big responsibilities. In this position, she supervises 12 people who collectively respond to and route 700,000 calls each year, process 12,000 ID cards, pull more than 12,000 patient files, and produce nearly 130,000 copies of patient information. Porras also establishes and manages the budget, sets staffing schedules, interacts daily with her VA customers and provides job counseling and coaching to her staff.

“Aside from my newfound independence, my favorite part of my job is the people,” Porras said in a recent speech. “I get to do the hiring now and I look directly into the eyes of the people I interview when we talk. When I bring in new hires, I see my old self in them. They are like I was—shy at first and not very confident; maybe they received ‘the look’ too many times as well. But, then you see them grow. They can do anything that they want to do. I try to teach them that their only obstacles are the ones they set in their own minds.”

“Porras is a fantastic role model,” said Jim Aynes, executive director of Employment Source. “She inspires people with her positive attitude and the belief it’s possible to overcome obstacles to succeed. She also has a wonderful heart, possessing all the best qualities. She’s an incredible success story for the AbilityOne Program.”

In recognition of her considerable achievements, Porras was honored with the 2003 NISH National Evelyne Villines Award for outstanding AbilityOne employees who progress to jobs in the private sector.

“I believe God’s new plan for me now is to share my story in hopes that I can make a difference in the life of another person with a disability,” Porras said. “Since winning the NISH National Award I have had the opportunity to

meet with North Carolina senators and congressmen to promote the AbilityOne Program. I am passionate about improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.”

Todd Walker **Didlake, Inc.** **Manassas, Virginia**

Todd Walker was supposed to be born on the Fourth of July in 1976, a true bicentennial baby. However, that is not what happened. Almost a month earlier, Walker was born prematurely, weighing only 3 lbs. 13 oz. A few years later, he was diagnosed with mild retardation, mild Tourette’s syndrome and permanent hearing loss in his left ear.

According to the U.S. Census, there are more than 17 million people living in the United States today who have a severe disability. About 70 percent of them are unemployed. The numbers are staggering and, according to Walker, this should not be the case, not when wonderful programs such as the AbilityOne Program exist.

In 1988, Walker’s family moved to Woodbridge, Va., where he attended public school. At the age of 21, he obtained a special high school diploma. After working for a grocery store for two years without much



Todd Walker

progress, Walker wanted to move on. He applied for a job with Didlake, Inc., a nonprofit agency based in Manassas, Va. Through Didlake, Walker worked as a custodian at the Pentagon as well as in the mailroom at the Department of Energy.

In 1999, the FBI headquarters signed an AbilityOne contract with Didlake. "My supervisor recommended me because I was a hard worker. I applied and got the job and the necessary security clearance," Walker said.

The FBI's headquarters has two million sq. ft. of office space and 6,000 employees. Through Didlake, 14 people with disabilities, including Walker, are responsible for six mail runs a day. Together, they deliver approximately 20,000 pieces of mail daily, including time-sensitive and top-secret deliveries. A few years ago, the mailroom where Walker works won the GSA (General Services Administration) Mail Center of the Year Award.

Walker continuously encourages other employers to hire employees with disabilities by reciting the speech he gave at the National Postal Forum in Anaheim, Calif. on May 19 of this year. "Yes, I have a disability. And I also have a job. I get a paycheck every two weeks. I pay taxes with that paycheck. Have you ever met someone who didn't mind paying taxes? Well now you have. I'm proud to be a taxpayer," he said.

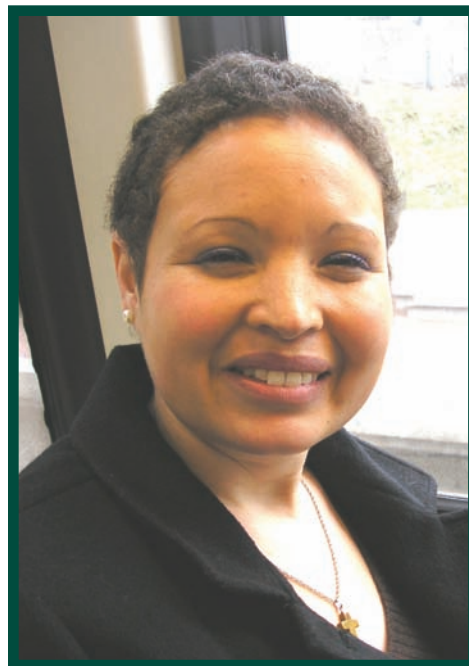
When he's not busy working, Walker enjoys visiting his two nieces in Atlanta. He is proud that his paycheck allows him to buy the plane tickets to travel.

"There are millions of people with disabilities who want to get a paycheck and pay taxes. So I ask you to use the AbilityOne Program for your next mailroom contract," Walker said in his National Postal Forum speech. "Because while I was not born on the Fourth of July, I am still one of the proudest Americans you will ever

meet. And, Americans take care of each other."

Brenda Sheaffer Melwood Upper Marlboro, Maryland

"What this act of Congress [Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act] means to me is that I have a supportive environment that includes me in the workforce," said AbilityOne Program employee Brenda Sheaffer. "I have a place to go in the morning. I have people who need me. And, my parents feel good about my future. I no longer accept government benefits. I am a tax payer instead of a tax user."



Brenda Sheaffer

As the second of five children adopted by her parents, Sheaffer grew up in Oxon Hill, Md. As an infant, Sheaffer's mom noticed that she didn't hit developmental milestones as quickly as other children. Later diagnosed with a learning disability, Sheaffer attended special education courses. Although she excelled at reading, she had difficulty with math. After graduating with a special certificate, Sheaffer worked a series of jobs that weren't good matches for her abilities before coming to Melwood, a nonprofit agency based in Upper Marlboro, Md.

Nationwide Search for Spokespersons

AbilityOne Veteran with a Service-Related Disability

Is there a direct labor employee who has a service-related disability on your nonprofit agency's (NPA's) AbilityOne contract? The NISH National Marketing department is conducting a nationwide search for veterans who are interested in speaking on behalf of the AbilityOne Program in front of an audience of federal customers and potential federal customers. These veterans would have the opportunity to remind federal customers to support America's veterans by thinking AbilityOne first, in addition to adding new skills and experience to their resume.

AbilityOne Program Employees

NISH is also seeking AbilityOne Program employees who work in all lines of business to speak on behalf of the Program to federal customers and potential federal customers. These individuals will have the opportunity to remind customers of the positive impact the AbilityOne Program has on the lives of people with severe disabilities.

NISH Marketing will interview the speakers, collaborate with them to write their speeches and arrange for travel reimbursements. All the speakers have to do is participate in an interview with a speechwriter, travel to events and speak about their experiences.

Please contact Sarah Gray at 571/226-4634 or sgray@nish.org with information about qualifying candidates.


Her first job with Melwood was as a custodian at the National Zoo. When Melwood secured an AbilityOne Program contract to clean a prominent General Services Administration building in Washington, D.C., Sheaffer applied for the job and obtained the necessary security clearance. She began work on this contract in 2000 and, eight years later, continues to excel in her job. Sheaffer is primarily responsible for vacuuming and dusting.

“At Melwood, I have an umbrella of support,” Sheaffer said in a recent speech. “If I didn’t work for Melwood, I would collect government benefits

instead of working. Or, I might work at a commercial job and then be let go because of my special needs. But, I am working and paying taxes. I am very proud of myself.”

Sheaffer is proud that her job allows her to support herself. In addition to paying rent for her apartment, Sheaffer pays for electricity, groceries, clothes, a metro pass and other essentials. With her kindheartedness and generosity, Sheaffer also uses her paycheck to give back to those who have supported her over the years, encouraging her to try her best and reach her full potential. For example, Sheaffer proudly notes that she bought tickets one year for her

entire family to see Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Similarly, she signed her parents up for a special tour of the White House around Christmastime one year. “I was proud to do that for them. They have given me so much. I wanted to give something back to them,” she said.

“Because of Melwood, I can afford to support myself,” Sheaffer said. “The money goes into my account, and my parents use that money to pay my bills. Remember, I don’t understand math. I don’t understand money. But, I understand that the money I make pays for all the things I need.” 

NISH Board Elects James Barone as Chair

NISH recently elected **James Barone** of Centreville, Ohio as the new chair of its board of directors. Barone, director, Personnel (retired) Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, assumed the position after serving as a board member for eight years. NISH plans to leverage Barone’s expertise in several areas, including leadership and management. Barone, who was elected to serve a two-year term, was a member of the federal government’s Senior Executive Service. He was the first civilian appointed to lead an Air Logistics Center as director of the Sacramento Air Logistics Center, McClellan Air Force Base, Calif., where he was responsible for all center operations with nearly 8,000 civilian and military personnel.

Two New Board Members

Jim Gibbons represents Goodwill Industries International, one of six national nonprofit agencies on the NISH board. He previously served as president and CEO of National Industries for the Blind for 10 years. Along with NISH, NIB is a central nonprofit agency dedicated to facilitating employment opportunities and upward mobility through the AbilityOne Program. Gibbons also served as president and CEO of Campus Wide Access Solutions, a wholly-owned subsidiary of AT&T. He has held leadership positions in operations, product management and mergers and acquisitions. Gibbons also served as a board member of the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind and president of the World Blind Union North American/Caribbean Region.

Steve Purdue represents the American Congress of Community Supports and Employment Services (ACCSES) on the NISH board. During his career, Purdue was president of Idaho Special Olympics and president of the Idaho Association of Rehabilitation Facilities from 1978 to 1980. He also served as president of ACCSES from 2001 through 2005 and is currently the immediate past president. He also currently serves as the ACCSES AbilityOne Program Co-Chair. Purdue has demonstrated commitment to the disability community, having been chairman of the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce Small Business Council, twice a member of the board of directors of the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce and board chairman of the Traverse Bay Economic Development Corporation.