



MEDIA RELEASE

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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TENNESSEE REHABILITATION CENTER GRADUATES OVERCOME BARRIERS TO FIND EMPLOYMENT

SMYRNA , Tenn.– More than 75 students with significant disabilities donned cap and gown on Friday, August 27 and proudly walked or rolled their wheelchairs across the stage at the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC) in Smyrna. The men and women represent 41 Tennessee counties and are committed to working and living independent lives.

The students have all been diagnosed with various disabling conditions, including traumatic brain injury, mental retardation, or autism. Their studies and hard work in programs offered at TRC have given them tools to overcome physical and emotional barriers and prepared them for employment. Areas of study offered at the TRC include Building Maintenance, Business Education, and Hospitality Training.

Keynote speaker at today's graduation was Sara Ezell, program coordinator for Project Opportunity at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital. Project Opportunity is a career training and employment program for high school students with disabilities and requires total immersion and on-the-job-training in the healthcare setting. DHS helps sponsor Project Opportunity which, to date, has placed 80 percent of its graduates in full or part-time employment. Ezell urged the TRC graduates to be realistic in their employment goals.

"I want to encourage people, whether they have a disability or not, to achieve what they are created for," said Ezell. "I want you all to channel your energy to possibilities so that opportunities that may arise won't pass by as you run toward an unattainable goal. Sometimes that is easy to figure out, and sometimes it requires a process of trial and error. But EVERYONE has a purpose to fulfill."

Ezell could have been speaking directly to the Student Speaker, Allen McClendon. The 53-year old, originally from Soddy Daisy, was confined to a nursing home for several years after suffering a brutal assault which left him with a traumatic brain injury. But McClendon didn't want to settle for life in a nursing home and found the TRC through a search on the internet. He entered the state's Vocational Rehabilitation program, enrolled at the TRC, completed the TBI training and Building Maintenance training. McClendon now has a full-time job with a Nashville-based retirement community and said to the crowd of graduates, "Don't ever let anyone tell you what you can't do!"

The Tennessee Rehabilitation Center is a state-operated comprehensive rehabilitation facility. It is one of only eight such centers in the nation. Services are provided on campus, and the majority of clients live on site while receiving services. The length of programs offered at TRC varies, depending upon the individual client's interest, abilities and needs. Support services are also offered to clients, including residential living skills training, driver's education, and physical and occupational therapy.

TRC is part of the Division of Rehabilitation Services within the Tennessee Department of Human Services. TRC serves approximately 1,000 Tennesseans with disabilities each year. Since opening its doors in 1977, TRC has served more than 31,000 individuals. For more information about the Division of Rehabilitation Services, please visit: <http://state.tn.us/humanserv/rehab/trc.html>

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