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Center helps disabled gain freedom

KATIE DUNN

Twenty years ago Patrick McMurtray was a college senior, star athlete, Eagle Scout and aspiring landscape architect.

As the result of a car accident, Mr. McMurtray suffered severe brain damage.

"They didn't think I was going to make it," said Mr. McMurtray. After he survived, he went through a "living hell."

"I have trouble processing information and deciding how I am going to react to it," he said. "The real world doesn't accommodate that."

Mr. McMurtray had to relearn how to walk, bathe and even dress himself.

"I've been trying to rebuild for 20 years," said Mr. McMurtray.

A few months ago he visited The Freedom Center, which has been open since December 2001. The center helps people with disabilities to live independently and serves Frederick and Carroll counties.

Freedom Center employee Maritza Pedraza helped Mr. McMurtray develop a routine.

"The Freedom Center has really helped me to categorize and schedule," said Mr. McMurtray. "It's helped me get past stumbling blocks and move ahead."

Mr. McMurtray was notified recently that his government housing voucher had been approved. Ms. Pedraza talked to Mr. McMurtray's prospective landlord and helped smooth over the moving process.

"They were very instrumental in making sure that everything that needed to be done got done," said Mr. McMurtray.

That is what center is all about, said director Jamie George.

"We empower people with disabilities to live self-directed lives," said Ms. George. "We want people to be able to maintain independence in their own home."

The federally funded organization conducts independent living skills training. The center deals with people of all ages with all kinds of disabilities, said Ms. George.

Center employees provide counseling and more than half of the employees are required to have disabilities.

"We are people with disabilities," said Ms. George, who has a hearing disorder. "We have been there and done that. We can show people, 'This is how we did it.' We can show them the ropes of how we did it."

"We are all kind of in the same boat," said Freedom Center employee Paul Hartman, who had a traumatic brain injury.

Ms. Pedraza, who has a blood disorder, said this is the best job she has ever had. Ms. Pedraza occasionally visits people with disabilities while on the job.

Last week Ms. Pedraza brought supplies to local resident Connie Harshberger, who is a diabetic and has a foot problem.

"Maritza helped us to get medicine and supplies," said Mrs. Harshberger. It is extremely difficult for Mrs. Harshberger, who said she is also in the end stages of renal failure, to walk. Mrs. Harshberger also has trouble breathing, said her husband, Charles.

"The Freedom Center has made it a little easier," said Mr. Harshberger, who has had problems with previous organizations that tried to help his family. But with the Freedom Center "all you have to do is pick up the phone and call."

People come to center with all kinds of disabilities, said Ms. George.

"Some people who come to us don't know how to manage money or balance a checkbook," she said.

The center is also very concerned about elderly people stuck in nursing homes, because sometimes they don't know about alternatives, said Ms. George.

"We need to have better service for the elderly population," said Ms. George.

"People with disabilities shouldn't be treated any differently," said Ms. George. "We are people. We're not the disability."

The Freedom Center, at 1560 Opossumtown Pike, is having an open house on April 17. Staff will be on hand to answer peoples' questions and snacks will be provided, said Ms. George.

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