



# COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

## The DSP Chronicles

### Gifford Hess:

#### Special Needs Program DSP Called 'A Pro'

By TOM KING



Gifford Hess

### At A Glance

**Name:** Gifford Hess

**Age:** 53

**Home:** Ghent, N.Y.

**Position:** Direct Support Professional/  
Day Habilitation Counselor II

**Where:** Special Needs Program  
(SNP) Inc.

**Number of People He Supports:** 25

**Key Quote:** *"I treat the people I support like adults. I speak to them on my level and make them aware that they are adults with rights. I make them feel comfortable, wanted, needed and safe. My safety comes second."*

**How a Colleague Describes Him:**

*"Our clients, they love Gifford and they warm up to him and trust him. He finds out what they need or want and goes with it. He's great to work with. It's fun to watch him interact with everyone."*

*- John Gambino,  
Director of the  
Day Habilitation  
Program and  
Gifford's supervisor.*



Meet Gifford Hess. He is:

- A man who always has an upbeat attitude.
- A Direct Support Professional (DSP) who speaks of compassion and a helping hand.
- A man who teaches skills.
- A professional who adapts to those he supports.
- A professional who never says "no" when asked to pitch in.
- A man who takes his work very seriously.

Gifford, 53, is a DSP at the Special Needs Program Inc. in , Ghent, N.Y., about 40 miles southeast of Albany. He is a Day Habilitation Counselor II and has been at Special Needs Program (SNP) since March 2004. In his role he supports – at one time or another – each of the 25 people in the DayHab program at SNP.

"Gifford is very hard-working and very professional in all that he does for us," says John Gambino, director of the Day Habilitation Program and Gifford's immediate supervisor. "He's very outgoing and lends a helping hand to everyone. He's a big guy with a big heart."

When asked to describe his primary responsibilities, Gifford says simply: "To help our consumers live a normal life; to protect and serve them, to help with their everyday needs."

Before coming to SNP, Gifford worked at two facilities counseling juvenile boys.

"Gifford caught my attention early on because when he is in training, he takes it very seriously," says Karen Fritz, SNP's Training Coordinator. "He is committed to furthering his education and values knowledge. For the College of Direct Support courses, he had to extend himself to learn some computer skills, which he succeeded

in. He never says 'no' when asked to pitch in and he always has a great attitude."

In addition to his Day Hab job, he works respite daily and sometimes covers at some of the residential group homes. When he leaves SNP daily around 3:30, he then goes to a residence to offer daily supports to a man until 6 p.m. and then he heads home.

"Every day is different. It is important to be aware of your surroundings. My challenges right now are how to address the needs of a consumer with echolalia. If you respond to him, it encourages him to continue, if you don't respond, he's likely to display challenging behavior. It's always a challenge," he added.

He uses that word challenge a lot in conversation. "I enjoyed working with the juvenile boys, but this is far more rewarding and far more challenging," Gifford says. "I work with clients who are non-verbal and with clients who have a range of disabilities and communicating with them is a huge challenge."

He supports men and women who have various disabilities including profound intellectual disabilities, Autism, Down syndrome, and Epilepsy. "I have to be adaptable and every day I have to learn to communicate with each person to find out what's important to that person and what they want to do and where they want to go."

Those in the program spend five to six hours a day, five days a week, out in the community and Gifford is there with them. "Our clients, they love Gifford and they warm up to him and trust him," Gambino says. "He finds out what they need or want and goes with it. He's great to work with. It's fun to watch him interact with everyone."

Michael Williams is one of the men who Gifford supports. Here's what he had to say about his

*continued ...*

If you would like to nominate a Direct Support Professional to be profiled in *The DSP Chronicles*, please send your correspondence to Tom King at [tking@collegeofdirectsupport.com](mailto:tking@collegeofdirectsupport.com). Please briefly explain why you are nominating this person to be featured.

# The Job, The People & More from Gifford Hess

**Describe the types of supports you provide for your clients:** “I work with several individuals at a Day Hab program, where I teach them skills to live in everyday situations. I give care, first aid, understanding, and help with all communication. I bring them into the community so they can adjust to being outside their comfort zones. I provide love, a helping hand, and am like a parent or friend to them.”

**Tell us a little about the people you support:** “I work with a population of individuals with diagnoses including moderate to profound mental retardation, on the Autism spectrum, Down Syndrome, Epilepsy, TBI, and Tourette syndrome. Some individuals have additional medical issues such as Parkinson’s and dual-diagnoses such as schizophrenia.”

**What is the most enjoyable part of the job?** “Teaching and watching our consumers grow.”

**What is the most challenging part of the job?** “Trying to understand them. Thinking about what I can do to make their lives better.”

**What got you interested in being a DSP?** “Working in other fields similar to this one. I enjoy teaching and learning from all my years working with individuals.”

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friend: “He does a good job. We got outside. We count the tractors and the red trucks. I help him cook. I do the burgers and he does the hotdogs.”

From time to time Gifford says he encounters people who are uncomfortable being around individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities. “Some people are welcoming and understanding and others are not,” Gifford said. “And I can get really irritated about this. Not long ago we were in a mall and one of my guys was loud and making noise and acting out and a mall cop came over and asked us to leave. I told him that this gentleman has as much right to be



Gifford Hess, right, with his friend Michael Williams

**What is the hardest part of the job?** “Just trying to understand their wants and needs. I have to guess when they’re not feeling well. I try to figure out what is making them happy, sad or mad.”

**What is the most satisfying part of the job?** “When I get a smile, a thank you, a hug, or just letting me know they are okay, I feel great. I enjoy their company even when they have a challenging behavior.”

**Would you recommend this career to others and why?** “Yes I would recommend it. It is a great field to work in. I enjoy it. You meet a lot of interesting people.”

in the mall as anyone and that a kid who was crying and screaming was making more noise than my client. It gets frustrating sometimes, but I have learned to deal with this.”

What has he learned since becoming a DSP and working with individuals with disabilities? “I treat the people I support like adults. I speak to them on my level and make them aware that they are adults with rights. I make them feel comfortable, wanted, needed and safe. My safety comes second.”

## The DSP Chronicles

This publication introduces you to Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) from around the country and chronicles their stories as they go about the important work of direct support. They discuss the job: the challenges, the success stories, how they work with those they support and the unique ways they get the job done. DSPs are America’s quiet and unknown heroes. Their dedicated and hard work improves the lives of those they support. Many work more than one job. They are devoted to the DSP profession and to those they serve.

The DSP Chronicles are archived on our website at [www.collegeofdirectsupport.com](http://www.collegeofdirectsupport.com) and also on the website of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals – [www.nadsp.org](http://www.nadsp.org). If you would like to nominate a DSP to be featured, please contact Tom King at 1-877-353-2767 (toll free) or email him at [tking@collegeofdirectsupport.com](mailto:tking@collegeofdirectsupport.com).

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