Perhaps one of the first things you notice about Tina is her infectious smile as she greets you with a sincere: “Hello, welcome to Walmart.” So with her cheerful demeanor, it is easy to see how she’d be a natural at being the first friendly face you see when entering the store. However, despite her positive attitude and a dedicated determination to work, her path to this career hasn’t been an easy one. You see, at the age of 58, when many folks are thinking about retirement—this is Tina’s first job.

While many people enter the workforce long before their teenage years or a college-prepared career, Tina’s journey to employment has been a lifetime in the making. The road she traveled was long and riddled with obstacles, disappointments and challenges. It’s also been an inspiration for those traveling with her and helping her along the way.

Following high school at age 18, the Vineland native wanted nothing more than to find a job and be treated like everyone else. Unfortunately, her special needs created barriers that could not be overcome through her determination and positive attitude alone. Year after year, potential employers were reluctant to hire her because of her difficulties. Although she desperately wanted to work, she struggled with keeping up with the production requirements of a job, and became emotionally distraught when given constructive criticism by her supervisors. Fortunately, she entered the Easterseals New Jersey program, which provided her with vocational training and assistance to prepare her for the workplace.

When Jackie Hinton, employment specialist for Easterseals New Jersey started working with Tina in October 2015, she focused on coaching efforts to improve her self-esteem and to conquer the woman’s biggest challenge, which was how to handle criticism. The two used role-playing to explore various workplace scenarios to train Tina how to react appropriately. “We watched videos … from which she can draw strength,” explained Hinton.

Additionally, through the perseverance of a dedicated team at the Millville Employment Center, Tina’s wish came true in March when she joined Walmart.

She is proud of what she calls her “dream job” and her only disappointment is that she can’t work more. In addition to her greeter duties, management at the Vineland Walmart store has since carved out a special role for Tina who provides samples to guests in the grocery section, including various foods and drinks, from produce to Tina’s favorite—pastries from the bakery.

Tina, who lives in a group home in Millville, continues to be exposed to new things at work, such as how to use a computer to view her work schedule and to clock in and out. Fiercely independent, she also is being coached to ask for help when needed.

“What’s most amazing about Tina is that she has accomplished something that a majority of us never get to,” said Hinton. “While most of us take our careers for granted, so many folks hold out hope to find that one ‘dream job’ that we’d love to be at each day. Sadly, most will never obtain that type of satisfaction, but Tina has—and that is a testament to her character and passion for her community.”

Hinton will work with Tina as long as she also is being coached to ask for help when needed.

Easterseals New Jersey is one of the state’s oldest non-profit organizations with an objective to help enrich the lives of people living with disabilities. Although we know it as Easter Seals, the company rebranded in May as the one-word Easterseals. Since 1948, Easterseals New Jersey has been creating solutions to change the lives of people with disabilities and special needs. Its mission is to help individuals and families live, learn, work and play in their communities with independence, equality, and dignity over 7,000 people in New Jersey with developmental disabilities—including autism, physical incapacities, mental illness and other such difficulties—receive services each year through Easterseals. The programs are designed to help those with developmental disabilities work toward achieving independence and full community-integration; and for folks like Tina—to find a job of a lifetime.

Dream Job, At Last

Tina’s first job is a job of a lifetime.

{ BY MARGIE BARHAM }

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