

Debra Kellogg – From Homebody to Phlebotomist



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Sometimes, helping others is the best way to help ourselves. Such is the case with former consumer Debra Kellogg.

Debbie joined Unity House’s independent housing program in May 2007, and soon found herself in an apartment on Perrine Street in Auburn. She credits Senior Counselor Cindy Gibson with helping her make arrangements for the apartment: “Cindy was awesome,” said Debbie. “She was there to help with anything I needed.”

Program Manager Judy Fisher assisted Debbie in working with some of her creditors, helping her to lower her interest rates and better manage her finances; Judy and Cindy truly admire Debbie’s resolve. “Debbie possesses a great deal of drive and determination to succeed despite having a mental illness,” says Cindy. “Instead of looking at her illness as a deterrent, she viewed it as a challenge, and overcame every obstacle that was placed in her path with that same determination. She is a role model for others with mental health challenges, with her positive attitude and willingness to share her own struggles.”

Shortly after joining Unity House, Debbie began her career with the American Red Cross, commuting to Syracuse on a daily basis. She is quick to credit the vocational services staff at Seneca Cayuga ARC for assisting her in obtaining her position there. She especially likes the travel, which has taken her to blood drives all over the state. Initially, Debbie took the bus to and from Syracuse, but it wasn’t long before she was able to buy her own car, making the commute a lot more convenient and allowing her to travel for her job.

During a blood drive, Debbie works with up to three donors at a time for about 20 minutes each. In that time, Debbie goes through a number of processes, including reviewing each donor’s health history, checking vital signs, pricking fingers to test for the proper level of iron, actually drawing the blood, and finally filling six tubes of blood to be used for testing purposes. Debbie is also trained to do “double reds,” which is a process that separates the donor’s red blood cells from the blood plasma and then injects the plasma back into the donor along with some saline. This process produces twice as many red blood cells than a traditional blood donation, and with the current blood shortage, is especially needed. The blood drives vary in size, but at one collection event this spring, Debbie and her coworkers received donations from over 140 donors.

Shortly after starting with the Red Cross, Debbie pursued another goal – attending college. She enrolled at Onondaga Community College, where she successfully completed a phlebotomy certification course. Phlebotomy prepares individuals for a career in blood drawing and is an integral part of the health care team. There is an increasing demand for qualified phlebotomists in a variety of medical settings - hospitals, physicians' offices, laboratories, and reference laboratories. Debbie took a two-part course, approved by the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, completing 44 hours of classroom instruction, followed by 120 hours of clinical experience at a medical facility. After passing a New York State examination, she earned national certification in the field.

This April, Debbie decided to move to Syracuse to be closer to work. She stayed with a coworker who had a little extra space. A couple months later, another life change took place – Debbie transferred to the Red Cross' Albany office and moved closer to the state capital for her new position.

Debbie says that it was a challenge to move back to the Albany area, where her mental health problems started. "But what I learned through counseling really helped me get through it," she said.

Debbie is settling into her new life and becoming more of a country person. "I used to be a city girl," she laughs. "But it's nice and quiet in Ballston Spa, and I'm getting used to living in a rural area." She is staying with her uncle now, but through good financial planning, is hoping to pay down some bills and get her own apartment in the spring. She finds her work gratifying but hectic, with long hours and different ways of doing things. Yet, she is happy and pleased with her choice to return to the area.

For someone who once considered herself to be a homebody, Debbie has made some amazing changes in her life and become much more outgoing – forging connections with Unity House staff, seeking out new jobs, moving three times, and building relationships with coworkers and others. She says that having a support system in place with Unity House employees, family, and friends played a big part in her growth over the past two and a half years.

"Unity House gave me 100% of my security – they were always there for back-up," said Debbie. "Unity House and Cayuga County Mental Health were amazing – it really helps to know someone is there for you."

From the perspective of the Unity House staff who worked with Debbie, the credit for Debbie's success lies with one person – Debbie herself. Bravo!