

'A remarkable story' — Local cook's achievement over his disability & support he received earn state recognition

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Imagine having a dream and the ability to achieve it, but the inability to really tell anyone what you can do in order to have the opportunity to try.

For the first 20 years of his life, Antawn Hill didn't have to imagine. He lived it. The young man from Charles City knew deep down what he wanted to be, that he had it within him to succeed as a professional cook. But a profound speech impediment was keeping him from that dream — or even enjoying what most would consider to be a "normal" life.

"Antawn did a job shadow with me his junior year and I had no idea what he said that whole day," recalled Dave Holschlag, the owner of Dave's Restaurant in Charles City. "We couldn't communicate with him. This kid wanted to work so hard and be a cook so bad, but there was a definite communication issue."

That was then. Now, with a little help from his friends, speech therapist and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the 21-year-old Hill is living his dream of being a cook. What's more, he's able to tell people about it.

"It's a total, total miracle," his mother, Tamella Hill said.

On Wednesday, Hill was honored with a Certificate of Excellence and Achievement by Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS) and drew praise from local and state officials alike.

"This is a remarkable story — and one of 228 in North Central Iowa that we could be talking about,"



Local speech therapist Brianna Baker, Antawn Hill and Dave Holschlag of Dave's Restaurant were all recognized and honored Wednesday at a National Disability Employment Awareness Month reception in Charles City.

remarked State Rep. Mark Kuhn of the number of disabled Iowans who through IVRS realized their vocational goals this past year. "I look out over the crowd as Antawn's story was being told and there is more than a few teary eyes and big smiles. It just goes to show how much you can help someone with even just a little help."

IVRS Rehabilitation Supervisor Steve Faulkner from Mason City and Kenda Jochimsen of Des Moines, the chief of the IVRS Rehabilitation Services Bureau, both made a special trip to Charles City to be on hand Wednesday to honor Hill. They were joined by Kuhn, State Sen. Amanda Ragan, a spokesperson for U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley who read a letter from the Senator and Mayor Jim Erb who read a National Disability Employment Awareness Month proclamation.

Faulkner explained that IVRS is an agency of the Iowa Department of Education that works with people with disabilities to help them achieve their employment dreams.

"We don't do that work alone. We have a lot of help from the community," he said. "We consider people from business and industry to be our partners, too. We all work together to help make North Iowa a great

place to live and allow people to actually be able to use their education and skills to help our local economy.”

The spotlight this day fell on Hill, a 21-year-old who didn't speak until he was three years old and has been receiving speech therapy assistance pretty much ever since.

“I started working with Antawn when he was a senior in high school,” explained IVRS rehabilitation counselor Mary Ott. “Antawn has always wanted to be a cook, but he had a problem that he felt kept him from being successful. He had stuttering issues that affected his self confidence a great deal. Out of high school he was washing dishes and thought that was as good as it was going to get.

“Then one day I receive a phone call from his employer, Dave (Holschlag), who said ‘Antawn still wants to be a cook, What can we do to help him?’ We talked about this device we heard about.”

A friend of Holschlag's who is a retired nurse, Malinda Quint, first heard about the ‘Easy Speak’ device on the television show, “The Doctors.” He asked Hill if that might be something he would be interested in looking into. And with the help of Holschlag and speech therapist Brianna Baker of Floyd County Medical Center, Hill found himself at a clinic in Cedar Rapids trying out the Easy Speak.

“I have never heard Antawn speak as clearly as he did once he put the device on,” remarked Holschlag. “It was incredible.”

“When Antawn first got that, he let a message on my answering machine and I remember thinking, ‘Who is this?’ The improvement was so astounding I didn't recognize him,” said Ott.

Resembling a hearing aid, the tiny device “has a microphone that records my voice and with a 0.1 second delay kind of replays it back to me,” explained Hill. “I'm the only one who can hear it.”

Holschlag said that the device does not work for everybody and Baker called it a “one in a million fit, just perfect for Antawn.”

“The day we went to the clinic, the tears just flowed from my eyes,” recalled Hill's mother. “He was 20 years old and my child could finally talk. It's made all the difference in the world.”

He was accompanied to the clinic by Holschlag and Baker. It was noted the Hills had transportation issues getting to Cedar Rapids and Dave drove them down personally. Baker went along to learn how the device operated and how to best help Hill utilize it.

For their efforts and support above and beyond the call of duty, both Holschlag and Baker were presented with Certificates of Appreciation by Ott and IVRS.



“I really have to give a special thanks to Dave. He's taken Antawn under his wing like a mentor. It's all because of Dave and Brianna. I just thank you all so much,” commented Tamella Hill.

“The entire team has participated in this huge success,” noted Baker of all who have worked and supported Antawn.

That included IVRS, which helped arrange to cover the entire cost of the expensive Easy Speak device that the Hills otherwise could never have afforded.

“The bottom line is this guy has a lot of determination and zeal to succeed. It's just been a great success for him and everyone involved,” said Faulkner.

The difference in Antawn today is astounding, those that know him will tell you.

“When I first started working with him, he had very little eye contact and very little confidence,” reported Ott. “You see before you today a very confident young man who's making eye contact and smiling. It's amazing how that small device that has helped him with his

stuttering problem has helped him reach this point today.”

She said that prior to the device being installed, Antawn had never gone to a restaurant and ordered his own food or gone into a store and purchased his own clothing.

“After he got device, that very day, he ordered his own meal and bought himself a shirt,” she commented.

“It was awesome,” said Antawn with a huge smile on his face.

“What we’re seeing here today is the essence of our organization,” stated Jochimsen. “For us to go from good to great as employers, we have to identify those people with the skills and drive that we need, but we also have to listen to their needs. We need to help them succeed. Bringing in the appropriate resources, like Brianna, helps us help them to realize their goals and dreams.”

Antawn said his new dream is to go back to school and one day become a professional chef. He credits all involved, but especially Holschlag, for making that goal a realistic one.

“Dave has meant about everything to me, like a teacher, a father, a coach. He’s definitely helped me a whole lot and it’s been a blessing to be able to work here,” Antawn said. “He’s a great boss.”

According to the Employers Disability Resource Network (EDRN), there are approximately 220,000 working-age Iowans — or 12.4 percent of the state’s total population — that are currently disabled in one form or another. That does not mean, however, that they are unemployable, with 83.5 percent of Iowans with disabilities holding a high school diploma or higher degree. Of those, 10.7 percent have earned a bachelor degree or better.

“About 18 percent of the population of the U.S. is disabled,” noted Faulkner, who himself is disabled.



“So really, we represent a very large minority of really untapped potential of talent that can be used to help the labor market in the years to come. I know I want to participate, I want to be part of the society that we live in, I want to own a home and have a job and pay taxes.”

The EDRN reports the average cost of workplace accommodations for disabled workers was less than \$600, with the vast majority of workers with disabilities needing no special accommodations whatsoever.

“National studies show that individuals with disabilities have equal or higher job performance ratings, have higher retention rates and have lower absentee rates than employees without disabilities,” the network reported. In addition, “the safety record of both employees with disabilities compared to employees without disabilities is identical.”

What’s more, EDRN states that, “92 percent of the American public view companies that hire people with disabilities more favorably than those that do not, and 87 percent of the public also agree that they would prefer to give their business to companies that hire people with disabilities,”

To learn more, contact Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services at 600 S. Pierce Ave. in Mason City, phone (641) 422-1511.