

Huntingdon woman honored by disabilities advocacy group

Traci Weller of Huntingdon was honored at the 2010 Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped (PIBH) Nettie Mann Achievement Award Dinner, which each year honors the outstanding achievements of Pennsylvania workers and the exceptional character they demonstrate in living and coping with disabilities, particularly in the workplace.

Weller was recognized along with the winner and 21 other runners-up at the Nettie Mann Achievement Award Dinner at the Hilton Hotel in Harrisburg June 8.

"I am honored to have the privilege of recognizing these inspiring persons with disabilities who have applied their abilities and determination to becoming such accomplished individuals," said Gary Crowell, PIBH president and CEO. "Each one has the respect and admiration of all who are present here this evening."

Weller has accomplished a lot in her life, in spite of some significant physical limitations. Due to a medical condition diagnosed at birth, along with suffering additional health challenges, Weller has little use of her left side. As a child, she spent many years in hospitals and in physical therapy.

Even though she was picked on in school, Weller worked hard to improve her physical condition enough to participate in school activities. She was the banner carrier and on the rifle corps for the marching band and participated in Special Olympics where she ran track and threw the discus. She won first place in these and other events.

After high school, Weller took a housekeeping position, but after 16 years found the demands of the job to be too

much stress for her body. She was referred by OVR to Goodwill Industries of Conemaugh Valley, Inc., and is now employed as a photo ID technician.

"In the beginning, the paperwork was hard for her, but over time, Traci learned to accomplish the job in spite of only being able to use her right hand," says Greg Mortimier, business development coordinator for Goodwill Industries of Conemaugh Valley, Inc.

Lou Ferrigno, actor, author, personal trainer and motivational speaker, served as the keynote speaker at the awards dinner. He spoke to his challenges of growing up with a hearing impairment. As a young child, an ear infection caused Ferrigno to lose 80 percent of his hearing. He said that growing up, he was drawn to reading comic books and the Incredible Hulk represented power and strength to him. As an adult, he made this comic book character come to life when, in 2004, he appeared in the blockbuster hit feature film "The Hulk," directed by Ang Lee. He also provides the voice for the UPN animated series "The Incredible Hulk."

Prior to his role as the Hulk, Ferrigno was a well known body builder. At age 21, he won his first Mr. Universe title, a Guinness Book record that still stands. The following year, he won the title again, and is still the only person to win consecutive titles.

In addition the Nettie Mann Achievement Awards, 34 Helping Hands Awards were given to Pennsylvania organizations that have demonstrated strong support for those with disabilities and are "helping people help themselves."

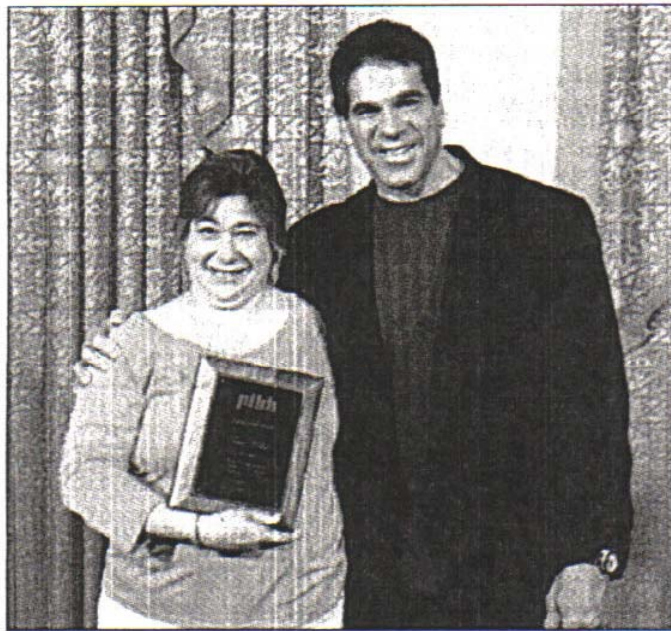
The Nettie Mann Achieve-

ment Award is named for an exceptional young woman who tragically died in a 1993 car accident just weeks before being named PIBH Worker of the Year. This distinguished award, including an all-expense paid trip to the award dinner for two, \$500 cash gift and plaque, is given to the person who most emulates Mann's enduring legacy of independence and dedication. Runners-up attend the award dinner to receive a plaque and \$100 cash gift. All are profiled in the PIBH newsletter.

PIBH is the central nonprofit agency in Pennsylvania dedicated to increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities through the fulfillment of state government contracts for goods and services. The unemployment rate for the nation is 9.7 percent while it is 8.9 percent for the commonwealth. Nationally, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 68 percent and in the commonwealth it is 72 percent. These numbers have been increasing, primarily due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The majority of those with disabilities who are able to work have the desire to. Rather than have the government pay, they would like to go out into the workforce and make their own way. PIBH helps many persons with disabilities achieve this economic independence, self reliance and quality of life through work, as well as reduce or eliminate their reliance on government funded social support and services programs.

Through 72 member agencies, PIBH employs approximately 4,000 persons with disabilities throughout the 67 counties in Pennsylvania.



Submitted photo

Traci Weller, left, met Lou Ferrigno, speaker at the 2010 Nettie Mann Achievement Award dinner.