

# A Shared Responsibility

By Kathy Martinez



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What can YOU do? It is a question wide open to interpretation. For many people, especially adults, the answer is often occupational in nature, serving to reinforce the intrinsic value of work. Put simply, work is fundamental to identity. It means much more than a paycheck; it offers purpose and the opportunity to lead a more independent, self-directed life for all people—including America's millions of people with disabilities.

I say this with conviction, because I am one of those millions of people. Like a lot of people employed through the AbilityOne® Program, I was born blind. My sister Peggy was also born blind. We were the middle of six children and, as of yet, there is no diagnosis for our blindness. From an early age, our parents instilled in us an expectation of work, and that has made all the difference in our lives. Indeed, work is essential to my self-fulfillment; it's a huge part of who I am. It's the same for Peggy, who today works as an information technology instructor and is also a talented musician.

But work's value actually extends far beyond the individual. When all people are able to contribute and be recognized for their skills and abilities, society as a whole reaps the benefits. Local economies are bolstered. Communities are strengthened—just like our family was strengthened when Peggy and I were expected to do our part.

This important principle is the premise behind this year's National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) theme: "A Strong Workforce is an Inclusive Workforce: What Can YOU Do?" This theme reaffirms that we all have a role to play—and benefit to

gain from—increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Held each October, NDEAM is a national campaign that raises awareness about disability employment issues and celebrates the many and varied contributions of America's workers with disabilities. Its roots go back to 1945, when Congress enacted a law declaring the first week in October each year "National Employ the

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Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. In 1988, Congress expanded the week to a month and changed the name to “National Disability Employment Awareness Month.”

Every day, in communities across the nation, the AbilityOne Program clearly does its part to advance NDEAM’s spirit and create a stronger, more inclusive American workforce. But the responsibility for doing so must stretch much further. Employers—of all sizes, publicly funded or not—must foster workplaces welcoming to employees and potential employees with disabilities. People with disabilities themselves must understand the importance of work and the value they have to offer. Youth with disabilities must grow up with the expectation of employment, and parents, educators and other adults of influence in their lives must reinforce this by cultivating a clear vision of work and community participation.

Put simply, America’s future success requires us to capitalize on the talents of all segments of the population, and the responsibility for making that happen must be shared. There is something everyone CAN do—every day of every month. ■



### 2012 NDEAM POSTER

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) offers a variety of resources, including a poster and ready-to-use articles, press releases and other materials, to assist organizations in observing NDEAM. To learn more, visit ODEP’s website at [www.dol.gov/odep](http://www.dol.gov/odep).