

# One Family, Two Direct Support Professionals, One Team

by Johann Holman, Graduate Assistant Center for Disabilities Studies, University of Delaware

Direct support professionals (DSPs) fill important roles in the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. They are often more than employees—they are friends, confidantes, and advocates who form integral partnerships with the people they support. Furthermore, family members may enter these partnerships to provide optimal care for persons with disabilities. The Coffin family of Seaford, Delaware illustrates what is possible when people with disabilities, their DSPs, and their family members work to maintain an active partnership.

Paul and Cheryl Coffin live in a neighborhood close to their two sons, Wayne and Dwayne, twins who were diagnosed at a young age with cognitive disabilities. Now adults, both brothers graduated from high school, and each lives independently in his own home. Wayne moved from his parents' home when he was 20 and shares a six-room house with a roommate. Dwayne followed seven years later and now has his own apartment a short distance from his brother. Each brother is employed; Wayne works at a local restaurant while Dwayne works at the year-round Bargain Bill's Flea Market.

Wayne and Dwayne both have a strong desire and fierce determination to lead independent lives. Their DSPs play vital roles in their lives. After almost seven years of working together, Wayne and his DSP, Charles Webb, have formed an effective professional relationship as well as a tightly knit friendship. Charles helps Wayne with a range of living skills, such as cooking and cleaning. He also attends wrestling matches or baseball games with Wayne. As Cheryl says, "I think Charles is in the ideal profession. It takes a special person, and he is

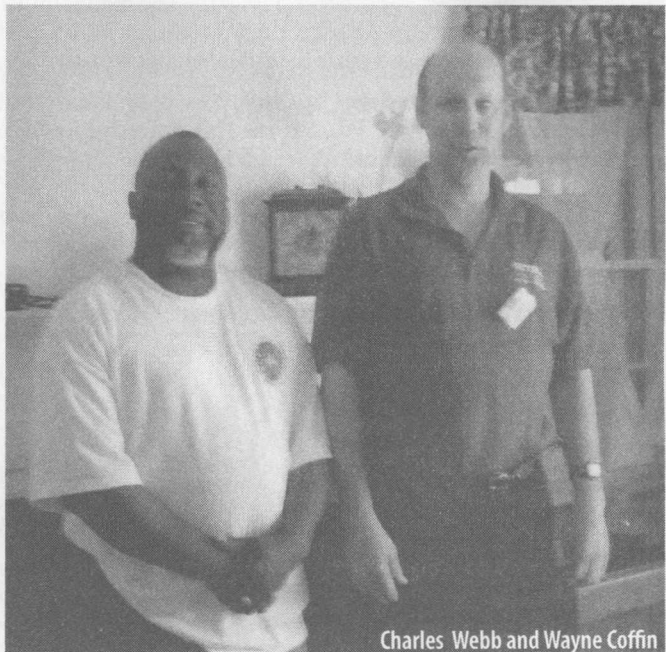
one."

Likewise, Dwayne has formed an invaluable relationship with his DSP, Jennifer Anderson, although they have only worked together on a full-time basis for five months. "Jennifer has made an effort to be a friend, rather than simply making an effort to come to work in the morning and do her job," says Cheryl. "That is a big, big attribute." For instance, Dwayne and Jennifer may go to the movies, an amusement park, the circus, or baseball games.

Charles and Jennifer offer Wayne and Dwayne the opportunity to be individuals, helping them pursue personal interests. Because Charles and Jennifer have formed caring friendships with each brother, they listen for and hear the unique voices of Wayne and Dwayne. "I assist Dwayne with his daily living but I really aim to help him accomplish his own personal life goals," notes Jennifer.



Jennifer Anderson and Dwayne Coffin



Charles Webb and Wayne Coffin

## About Direct Support Professionals

Direct support professionals (DSPs) are essential members of the disability community. They provide a range of assistance to people with disabilities, including those with physical, psychiatric, sensory, or cognitive disabilities; chronic illness; substance abuse; at-risk children and youth; and families who need assistance to care for loved ones. DSPs may have various job titles, such as residential counselor, employment specialist, family advocate, and personal support assistant.

According to The College of Direct Support, which is a national online training organization, over two million Americans are estimated to be working in these roles. The number of DSPs may be even higher, as their many different job titles obscure their actual number. Along with the range of job titles and needs of people with disabilities in the community, the tasks and skills of DSPs vary. They may help individuals with activities of daily living, communication, transportation, recreation, or home management. A DSP, for instance, might help a person bathe and dress, shop for groceries and prepare meals, or manage medications and health care appointments. The individual's unique needs dictate the services provided and the skills required of a DSP.

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Though Charles and Jennifer help each brother in a variety of ways, their relationships are reciprocal. “Some of the things Wayne does or says help me in my everyday living. I think we are both getting something from each other. I believe it,” says Charles.

Jennifer agrees, “There is just so much I have learned from Dwayne. For instance, he has taught me how to be an easy-going person who leads a more stress-free life. I am good to him but he is also good to me.”

While Charles and Jennifer are essential parts of Wayne and Dwayne’s lives, they also provide a priceless support system for Paul and Cheryl. “We have wonderful relationships with our DSPs,” says Paul. “Right now, we are in a position where we are very comfortable making requests. And Charles and Jennifer honor those requests.”

Open lines of communication and mutual respect are critical to this process. Because Paul and Cheryl work closely with Charles and Jennifer, they utilize a team approach to their sons’ care. “Even though we still have a lot of responsibility,

it is shared,” states Cheryl. “We work as a team, and that is extremely rewarding.”

“Paul and Cheryl have been excellent,” says Charles. “They have supported me, they trust me, and I thank them for that. If it weren’t for the relationship we have, we wouldn’t be able to help Wayne in the way that we do.”

“They are wonderful,” continues Jennifer. “They are always willing to go the extra mile to support their sons—and us.”

As the Coffins openly welcome DSPs into their lives, Wayne and Dwayne receive an unparalleled level of support. Furthermore, Charles and Jennifer each bring an exceptional level of caring and compassion to their jobs, although as Charles remarks, “I don’t feel like it’s a job. I feel like it is a life experience.”