



Gerson Ortiz

**PENNSYLVANIA**  
**GERSON ORTIZ**  
*Access Services*  
*Allentown, PA*

He's a 4th degree black belt, a DSP for 10 years and at Access Services he's an innovator. We're talking about

Gerson Ortiz, who has translated his love of karate into a full-blown martial arts program at Access that has spread to other Access sites in three towns now.

Access Occupational Therapist Bev Weinberg nominated him as the Pennsylvania DSP of the Year and says of him: "Gerson is a gifted martial arts instructor for individuals of all abilities, largely due to his own extraordinary ability to modify and adapt exercises to provide each individual with the 'just right' challenge."

This program he directs has inspired Access to embrace a larger integrated health focus, exploring additional ways to offer innovative opportunities to promote physical and mental health among the people it supports. Here is what's going on: people with disabilities have the opportunity to challenge their sedentary lifestyles, develop self-discipline, body awareness, focus, cardiovascular health, strength, and self-confidence. Each participant has his or her own uniform.

"When teaching martial arts, Gerson is working on their physical skills, but he is concurrently developing essential skills underlying successful social interaction. During class, Gerson explicitly incorporates lessons about body awareness, personal space, and respect," Weinberg says. "These 'soft skills' are often a challenge for those he supports, yet so important for the desired social and vocational outcomes. Individuals have the opportunity to practice these skills, and then apply them when they volunteer, work, and interact in their communities."

Due to his success in the day program, Gerson, who is from Chile, is now working with the Access CEO and others to move this program into the local YMCA, offering individuals with disabilities the opportunity to see themselves as integrated community members with talent and an ability to share, and for others to view them in the same light.

Gerson's promotion ceremonies where new belt colors are awarded to acknowledge hard work and improvement are indeed popular. "Dozens of individuals stand a little taller, smile a little bigger, and realize that their true limitations are only those they set for themselves," Weinberg added. "A noted Chinese proverb states, 'When the mind is ready, a teacher appears.' Everyone should be so lucky."



Veronica Rotaru

**REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**  
**VERONICA ROTARU**  
*Keystone Human Services*  
*International*  
*Chisinau, Republic of*  
*Moldova*

Veronica is a DSP of three years who works in The Supported Living service from

Falesti, a community-based service designed for six persons with intellectual disabilities who were deinstitutionalized from large residential institutions. It's a challenging place for any DSP. Nominated by Nicolae Ciocan, Veronica has been named as the International DSP of the Year.

Nicolae focused her nomination on Veronica's support for one man in particular. The man is 36 and spent 33 years in different residential institutions. His dream was to have a job to earn his own money. Veronica made a great effort to make connections with local people and managed to find him a suitable job. He also wanted a family – his lifelong dream.

She searched for his family to no avail. Veronica also started looking for possibilities to buy a house and she worked with a foundation to buy the house. "The biggest challenge for Veronica was to prepare him for independent living and assuming the responsibilities for a relationship as he got engaged and they want to get married and have children," Nicolae said.

After three years of work his dream is reality – he owns his own home. Then he was hired with a municipal sanitation company. He's using the money to renovate the house. Veronica then initiated a fund-raising campaign in the community that involved 100 people. "Also, thanks to Veronica, many volunteer activities were organized to support the renovation and furnishing his house. Veronica is proud of the success because this man is the first person from a supported living institution that managed to move to independent living and become a homeowner," she added.

Veronica believed in this man's dream and helped make it happen. She says that the most difficult issue for her to overcome is the temptation to make choices for the person as there is always a protection tendency. "The most important lesson for me is that trust should be learned. And that promises are perhaps the basic condition for building trust," Veronica said.