

My name is Teri Rust. I have been working for Shangri-La as a DSP for almost two years...this time. I have worked for Shangri-la in the past during college and in the summers of my first two years out teaching. But really, I have been "with" Shangri-La for 25 years, since my mom started working here when I was a kid. I would come to the big company picnics and other community and company events and I came in, on take your daughter to work days. I have grown up in this community. I've always known what a DSP is, and the kind of work involved. And just how important their role is to the people they serve. I watched my mom and the other develop these meaningful relationships with the people they serve that last a lifetime and do work that really matters, every single day. I had a mom, who sometimes had to miss holidays, special events and even just time with us as kids to do the work she was doing. Because DSPs don't get the holidays off, DSPs often get called in for extra hours. And they have to choose between their work and their family. As a kid, I didn't always understand why, but now that I have followed her into this field I understand.

I chose this work as a second career. I worked as a teacher for 14 years but had burned out and needed something new. I knew that coming to work in this field would be an excellent fit because I had loved my time with Shangri-la when I was younger. I also knew I could put to use a lot of my skills I developed while teaching with a few tweaks here and there. Some have asked why I would go into this work, when my earning potential would be much higher in an education related job. And honestly, that's probably true. But I chose this work because I knew by doing so, I would be making a real, day to day impact for the better in the lives of others. Also, it's kind of a family business. My mom and my youngest sister work for Shangri-la too.

A typical day for me starts with good mornings all around. Counting and giving meds, checking up on any documentation that happened while I was off to make sure I'm completely up to date on what has been happening with the individuals I serve because each day is new and there can be changes in medications, daily supports (has everyone had enough fluid intake, used the bathroom, how much have they slept etc.) Also, changes in supports based on current moods and temperaments. I help support with eating meals. And morning routines which includes toileting, teeth brushing, dressing. I help support people on doctor visits, outings into the community, cleaning house, laundry and finally at the end of the day I do my own documentation to inform the staff following me of the day that has happened.

I'd like you to think about yourself getting ready in the morning for your day. Think of how personal these little tasks of your day are. Imagine you needed supports to complete these intimate and private rituals. Who would you want brushing your teeth, helping you clean after using the restroom, getting dressed, shaving and brushing hair and so on? Would you want someone new, that you have only known a few days or weeks or someone you've known and built trust and a relationship with over the months and years?

I make meals, trying to balance doctor's orders personal preferences. Which can be hard, trust me. When personal preferences are hamburgers and fries and pizza or other fast-food options and are asked for so, so many times, very insistently a day. And only wanting to drink pop. Or wanting to have cup after cup of coffee. But doctor's orders say fast food and other junk should be limited to small quantities each week. And that pop has too much sodium, so that also needs to be limited. And someone else is limited to the number of ounces of fluid in a day. So, despite wanting to drink a cup of coffee an hour we must say "Not now, please wait."

We do the same with outings and being in the community, now with Covid restrictions in place. People cannot go to their day programs, worksites or other places of choice.

So, we think of creative ways around preferences and orders. We get creative to make everyone happy as best we can. We make zucchini pizzas. Buy carbonated water. We make bingo halls and bowling alleys in the home. We sing songs and dance, for hours if needed. We have special meal nights to make it like we are out to eat. And sometimes these creative patch jobs work and everyone is happy. But often the people we serve don't understand why they can't have everything they want or go anywhere they wish. We can't make them to understand that these "no's" do not come from us and that we are doing all we can to make them happy and follow orders to us to keep them healthy and safe. And they become angry with us. They let loose their frustration and misunderstanding with us. And we take that onto our load, we put on a smile and we continue on doing everything we can. And who can do this kind of thing well? Someone who just started and is only able to see a person on a piece of paper, or someone who knows these individuals as individuals and their wants and needs?

I have sat in hospital rooms holding hands as needles are injected, and doctors and nurses come and go, in and out, poking and prodding. I have asked a thousand and one questions of doctors as hastily scribbling notes to understand the hows and whys of a diagnosis. I watched every beep and line of the monitors and listened to breaths and prayed for recovery. Rejoiced when healing came. And I hold hands and say goodbye and speak words of comfort as people take their last breaths. And I cry as they go and feel a genuine hole in my heart. Again, I ask you. Who can do this? Someone new, another staff on the merry go round of in and out staff, that we attract now. Or staff who have developed deep and meaningful relationships through months and years of service to the people served?

The last year has been so full of absolute chaos. And do you know who was at work every day, and then some? Who never got to call in and say, "I'm working from home today." "Oh, I'll just Zoom in today?" "The air quality is hazardous, so I'm going to stay home because it's too dangerous to go outside and drive to work." Who came in every day, and on extra shifts in spite of covid, wildfires, bad air quality days and Ice storms? DSPs!!

We don't GET to call in. Our workplace doesn't close due to weather or health hazards. We leave the safety of our homes and our families and venture out into all the chaos that has been this year. Our families worry for our safety and we worry for theirs. But we also care deeply for those that we support, who need us. So we come. We show up everyday. We help them each day to live fulfilling lives, realize their full potential, meet goals and fulfill dreams as best we can despite the obstacles.

We need staff, support professionals, who want to make a career of this field. Who want to stay. Who want to make connections and a difference. But they cannot stay, if they cannot support themselves. The work done by Direct Support Professionals is truly, professional work. It is intimate, personal work. It matters to the people we serve and their families. It matters to us.

The people we serve deserve long term, consistent staff that know them. That develop relationships with them. Because staff who do this provide the most meaningful and quality supports for all facets of their lives. They deserve staff that won't need to leave as soon as something better paying comes along in order to live.

Staff deserve co-workers that we are not constantly have to train and watch leave and that we can rely on to shoulder the workload. That we can trust to provide supports for the people we care about.

Some people will say, does it really matter if staff come through on revolving door? Do the individuals you serve really notice. I'd like to give you an example of how I KNOW it matters. When I started, the house I work in has a resident, that I was told was pretty much non-verbal. She spoke not much more than 10 words or so to us. From what I gathered from the staff at the time, they had had a lot of overturn in the last few years. Well, over the last two years we have built a pretty steady staff. We have the same people nearly every day on the same shifts. This same person now speaks to us constantly. Not always exactly the words we use or in the same way, but she is always using words, and finding new words and singing songs. Not just relying on pointing or her limited 10-word vocabulary. She is able to express needs and wants. She lets us know when she doesn't want something. We have shown her that we are reliable and consistent. She trusts us. And because of that trust, she has found more of her voice.

Therefore, it is so important for you to really listen today. To give us the tools, which in this case is funding, to get the staffing we need. In order to keep the good, quality staff we have. And in order to be able to attract and choose quality candidates for open positions, we need the funding to pay a livable wage. It is not sustainable for staff to need to work their full 40-hours plus 10 or more hours of overtime or take on second jobs to make ends meet. This work is the most fulfilling work there is, but it is also challenging and tiring. We cannot allow people who spend their lives supporting others to continue on so poorly supported themselves.

Please, hear us. Please, do what is right for so many people in our State. be an example to the rest of this country, that Direct Support Professionals ARE valued. That the work we do matters. That the state of Oregon and those in positions of leadership truly understand the value of this work and the community of people that this work serves.

Thank you.