

## **BHDDH STAFF SPOTLIGHT: Erin Duarte**



When she attended a staff appreciation picnic last fall at Goddard State Park, Erin Duarte thought it was just going to be an afternoon of fun with coworkers.

Her supervisors at the Rhode Island Community Living and Supports(RICLAS) program had other ideas.

Asked to nominate a staff member for community living aide of the year, they had emailed suggestions to two regional managers. A few weeks later, with the picnic in full swing, RICLAS and BHDDH leaders shared their until-then unannounced plans for the new award. They also named the first winner.

Several community living aides had received nominations, but Erin had the most, and it wasn't hard to guess why. Since coming to BHDDH in 2019, she has been making it her mission to not only enter the world of the people she cares for but also take them out into the world, to places and events they might otherwise never see. The list of past destinations includes Block Island; Mystic, Conn.; a block party in Attleboro, Mass.; a sailing excursion in Newport; and performances of "The Nutcracker, Disney on Ice's "Into the Magic," and even Monster Jam.

"It was wonderful to see Erin receive this recognition, as she is always finding things for our residents to do. She actively looks for ideas, like the block party," said Kevin Savage, Director of BHDDH's Division of Developmental Disabilities. "It is not easy to get RICLAS residents to community events like that, but Erin, and many others, has been exceptional at doing so."

In nominating Erin, one supervisor wrote: "She takes the initiative." Another wrote: "Ms. Duarte continually exhibits what we seek in a Community Living Aide ... routinely taking" RICLAS clients "into community settings. These activities allow individuals the opportunity for full participation."

Asked about her efforts, Erin said she believes that opportunities to get out and learn and have fun should be for everybody.

"I definitely want them to be able to explore," she said. "I just love seeing them have a chance, just seeing a smile on their faces."

She quickly added that if not for "the great team she works with ... I don't think any of this would be possible."

The new RICLAS award — Direct Support Professional of the Year — was presented to Erin on Sept. 20, 2023, to coincide with Direct Support Professional Month. Going forward, it will be presented annually.