



Joe McNiry/staff photographer

Maria Mucaria, right, who is partially blind, teaches a classical piece of music for flute to Tina Shattuck of Cortland. Mucaria is helping Shattuck prepare for a classical music festival at the Blue Frog Coffeehouse on Nov. 18. Mucaria was honored Wednesday as a disabled employee of the year.

Disabled employees find ways to succeed

Annual county awards luncheon recognizes efforts of 5 workers and 6 companies

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Maria Mucaria must have applied for more than 100 teaching jobs after completing her music teaching bachelor's degree from the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam, but no one would hire her.

"They were concerned I wouldn't get to work because I couldn't drive," said Mucaria, a 34-year-old Cortland resident who is legally blind.

More than 10 years later, Mucaria was recognized as one of five Cortland County disabled employees of the year. The employees were honored Wednesday at the fifth annual Cortland County awards ceremony for National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

The event, a luncheon at the Elk's Lodge in Cortland that drew about 75 people, also recognized six companies that employ people with disabilities and a high school student on her way to getting a job.

It was put on by Access to Independence, Cortland Works Career Center, J.M. Murray Center's Employment Connections and the state's Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities department.

Mucaria, who is self-employed as a private flute teacher and a licensed massage therapist, was not the only disabled employee award recipient who once faced challenges getting a job because of her disability.

Ellie Schrader, 47, said she was diagnosed with emphysema in October 2002 and had to leave her job at Marietta Corp. because of the chemical odors. She couldn't find a receptionist job after her departure.

She said at an interview she would be upfront about her emphysema, just to be honest, but people would take her openness the wrong way.

"I never try to use my disability to get special treatment, but that's what some thought I was doing," said Schrader, who now works at Cortland Regional Medical Center as a receptionist.

J.M. Murray Center's Employment Connection branch helped her find the job, she said.

Schrader was recognized by her job coach, Sarah Goonan, for having a smiling face that touches hundreds of people a day, while Mucaria was recognized by her fiancé, Aaron Baier, for being hard-working, dedicated, open-minded, friendly and her own employer. Goonan had nominated Schrader, while Baier had nominated Mucaria.

Erik Hobart, a residential coordinator with the Franziska Racker Center, Courtney Walker, a buffet team member with Ponderosa and Jeni Oechslé, a baker's assistant at Price Chopper, also received employee of the year awards.

According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000 52 percent of the county's 2,712 disabled people between the ages of 16 and 64 were employed, while 74 percent of the 13,000 disabled people in the same age category were employed.

Employers were recognized Wednesday for their

efforts in trying to boost the percentage of disabled workers through hiring, training and providing references for people with disabilities.

Those employers were Northwoods Rehabilitation and Extended Care Facility, Custodial Services, Hampton Inn, Odyssey Networks, Gilda's and Sellco Industries.

For the first time this year local agencies presented an award to a high school student with a disability who is on his or her way to getting a job.

Cortland High School student Micki Mudge received the award Wednesday. She wants to work in the child care field and has experience working at various local child care centers, including BOCES.

A greater emphasis has been placed on preparing high school students with disabilities for careers, said Laura Pforter, a youth specialist with the J.M. Murray Center who presented Mudge with her award, and Kari Hilsinger another youth specialist with the J.M. Murray Center.

At the beginning of the school year both women were placed in Cortland High School as part of a three-year \$680,334 grant Cortland High School received through the state Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities office.

There, they will work with the school's approximately 150 students with disabilities to help them apply for jobs, explore their career options and recognize their strengths.

"It's great just seeing kids come in saying you can help out with applications," Hilsinger said.