



Lawrence man set for dream trip to Nashville country music festival

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on September 12, 2014 at 5:02 PM, updated September 12, 2014 at 7:02 PM

LAWRENCE— For as long as his brother can remember, 60-year-old Danny Connell has always been a country music fanatic, collecting hundreds of cassette tapes and CDs by classic artists including John Denver and Johnny Horton.

“This is all JC. Do you know who that is?” asked Connell, leafing through his organized CD case Friday and pointing to a yellow disc by his all-time favorite singer—the legendary Johnny Cash.

Connell, a Trenton native, is in for a special treat next week. With the help of Community Options, an organization providing housing and employment support to people with disabilities, Connell will attend a country music festival in Nashville, Tenn. His departure from Philadelphia International Airport is scheduled for Sept. 18, his 61st birthday.

“I don’t know what they have in store this year, but I’m going to have a good time down there,” Connell said. “I’m going to have fun.”

The oldest of five siblings, Connell hit his head on a dresser knob while falling off a bunk bed as a toddler, an accident that caused brain damage and led to seven surgeries, his younger brother Shawn Connell said.

“He wasn’t supposed to make 10 years old,” said his brother as they stood together in Connell’s blue room in Lawrence, where he lives in a Community Options group home. “He’s getting smarter with age. He’s sharp as a tack.”

Headquartered in West Windsor, Community Options serves thousands of people with disabilities across eight states. But the 25-year-old nonprofit group also helps make dreams come true, spokeswoman Kathryn Sampson said.

Community Options partnered with The Guided Tour, an organization providing cross-country tours for adults with special needs, to make Connell’s five-day trip happen, she said.

Along the way, Connell will see several performances, including one at the Grand Ole Opry, a small concert venue that’s hosted some of the most famous artists in the country music genre, and will receive a backstage tour.

When asked which artist he’s most excited to hear, Connell said, “There’s your answer,” gesturing toward to his CD collection sitting on top of his Philadelphia Eagles blanket laid across his bed.

But the music festival is only the beginning.

Connell will visit sites including the Johnny Cash Museum and the Country Music Hall of Fame, an iconic place filled with pictures and memorabilia of country music's past and present greats. He will also see The Dukes of Hazzard Museum, dedicated to the classic television show that ran from 1979 to 1985, Sampson said.

Also on the agenda is a Gray Line tour of Nashville on which Connell will learn about the history and landmarks of the city, and a ride on the General Jackson Showboat to eat lunch on the Cumberland River and enjoy live country music and entertainment.

Connell previously lived in Bordentown at The E.R. Johnstone Training and Research Center, which was shuttered in 1992. After its closure, Robert Stack, founder and CEO of Community Options, helped Connell and others move into group homes in Mercer County, Sampson said.

"I am proud to call him my friend," Stack said of Connell, in a statement. "Dan had been labeled a person with developmental disabilities. His true label is the kindest man anyone would have the pleasure to know."

The Nashville trip has been planned for more than a year, and despite his abounding excitement, Connell is keeping things simple, he said.

"The only thing I have to do is pack clothes," Connell said. "And my CDs."

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