

An important part Community Options, Inc.'s mission is to break down physical and attitudinal barriers to community integration and to dispel some of the common misconceptions about people with disabilities. Gabriella Maldonado's story is living proof that our goal has become and continues to be a reality.

Gabbi is a young woman who moved into a group home in 2008 after leaving her foster care placement of several years. Upon first arriving at Community Options, Inc., Gabi was extremely limited verbally; she could not express herself fully, spoke using a few simple words such as "hi" and "yes," would never initiate conversation, and would only answer "yes or no" questions.

Through the Community Options program named Option Quest, individuals with disabilities are able to develop employment skills by volunteering at various work sites in their communities. After participating in this program for a year and a half, Gabbi decided she was ready for a job. Gabbi worked with our employment department for the next several months filling out job applications and speaking with employers. COI staff worked diligently to prove to employers that despite Gabbi having Mosaic Down Syndrome and Moderate Mental Retardation, she was qualified for the positions for which she was applying and would work extremely hard to ensure she got the job done.

In February 2012, while working with Chili's Restaurant in San Antonio, Texas to raise awareness about Community Options, Inc.'s annual "Cupid's Chase 5 K Run," the employment staff with COI sought this as an opportunity to introduce Gabbi to the manager, request an application and explain her skill set.

Gabbi has now been working for Chili's for over ten months and is considered one of their best employees. She has great qualities; she comes to work on time, rarely calls in sick, never complains, and most importantly she gets the job done. She is receiving job-coaching services from COI staff, and is moving toward being able to work independently.

Monica Pollock, the General Manager said

"We pride ourselves on making people feel special."

Today, Gabbi's speech has improved greatly and she is highly verbal, even initiating conversations with staff and peers. She is able to communicate her wants and needs verbally, and can express her personality in a way that was previously impossible. She is happy with her job at Chili's and thankful to them for giving her an opportunity to prove that having a disability should never keep someone who wants to work from working.