

## Leila's Story

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Leila lived with her grandparents, her father and her sister, who also has a disability, while attending high school where she received a special certificate. For the next several years Leila and her sister stayed home entertaining themselves while her other family members worked for a living. Leila had minimal vocational and social skills and did not participate

in any valued social roles in the community. Leila was unaware of the fact that she could learn much needed life skills and even earn her own paycheck before coming to Alliance for Independence (AFI).

Leila receives individualized skills training and vocational training at AFI, acquiring numerous life and vocational skills. Leila now earns a paycheck by working on contracts, including several that require the use of a commercial sewing machine. She is involved in the Adult Basic Education program where she enjoys reading literature, math, and learning to use the computer and Internet.

Leila has served as president of AFI's Governance Committee and is currently the president of the AKtion Club, a service club for adults with disabilities sponsored by Kiwanis International. What stands out most about Leila is her desire to help others. Leila's membership in the AKtion Club is important to her because she wants to give back to the community. In 2007, she participated in the beautification project for Hunt Fountain Park, as well as a fundraiser that benefited Talbot House Ministries. Even before the chartering of the AKtion Club, Leila volunteered her time at the SPCA and received recognition for her dedication to the organization. She is a member of the Sunshine Chorus, as well as the Dream Team, which is a group of clients who volunteer their time to the public relations needs of the agency. Leila speaks at numerous United Way presentations and helps with agency tours by handing out brochures.

Leila has become very savvy and resourceful since coming to Alliance for Independence. Leila made it through

an emotional time after the untimely deaths of her father and grandmother and was able to use skills that she learned at AFI to get her family to safety in the midst of an apartment fire.

Leila said, "Before I came to AFI I sat at home for many years very bored. I never knew that I could earn a paycheck. Now that I have learned so many skills I have many interests, like using sign language to communicate with my friends who do not communicate with words and creating artwork. If I had not come here I might still be at home watching TV all day."



Today, she is doing just the opposite. Leila lives in her own apartment and has begun the process of starting her own business, selling homemade wreaths. Through working with Start-up Florida, a program offered by the University of South Florida's Center for Inclusive Communities, Leila has learned how to write a business plan, as well as how to market her product.

At this time, Leila is working on starting her own wreath business. She was one of four individuals chosen to participate in Start-Up Florida's Quick Launch Project, which is self-employment training presented by Tammara Geary and Griffin-Hammis Associates, LLC. The purpose of this training is to teach Leila how to produce a working business plan draft, used for leveraging support and financing. Initially, as a hobby, Leila would make Breast Cancer Awareness Wreaths to raise money for a good cause. This topic has great meaning to her because her sister has been diagnosed with this disease. *(Both Leila and her sister gave permission for us to share this information with everyone.)* Usually, Leila would sell these beautifully crafted wreaths in her spare time. Any money collected would be donated to the National Cancer Society. With the help of dedicated family members and supports in place from Start-Up Florida; Tammara Geary; her support coordinator, Josephine Hunt; and APD's supported employment liaison, Jennifer Monje; Leila is in the process of becoming educated in the world of self-employment and hopes that one day she will reach her goal of financial independence!