

## **Congratulations to our 2021 DSP of the Year Finalists!**

### **Read their nominations below!**

**Seth Ritchey**

**Organization:** [Ariel Clinical Services](#)

**Time with Ariel:** 6.5 years

**Years as a DSP:** 16 years

Seth knows a little about what it's like to experience the world with a disability. Can you imagine being 17 years old in high school with the world of opportunities in front of you upon graduation? Seth had a thirst for life and was always looking for the next adventure, he loved sports and the outdoors. His life changed in a quick moment when his friend lost control of his car and rolled several times throwing Seth from the vehicle. He woke up from a coma and was taken to Craig Hospital with a head injury and a spinal cord injury. He recovered from the head injury, his life in a wheelchair began. Seth will tell you after his accident left him paralyzed without the use of his legs, he dropped out of school and out of life for a while. He spent a few years just hanging out without much focus on anything other than having fun. His first job was a seasonal position with the Grand Junction City Parks & Recreation Department teaching tennis to all age groups. Then he got involved in wheelchair sports and things started to change. Seth thanks Lillian Brawer for connecting him with the Doris-Denker Wheelchair Sports Foundation where he traveled all over the county playing wheelchair tennis competitively. In 2006 he was ranked 3rd in the country in the A division. Things changed again in his life when he found out he was to be a father. Seth needed a full-time job to support his son so he turned to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation for assistance. DVR paid for driving lessons, hand controls, and a situational assessment to assure he was a good match for an employer. He landed a job with a nonprofit that helped individuals with developmental disabilities learn community skills. He stayed at that job for 9 ½ years before coming to Ariel Clinical Services. Seth has found his true passion integrating individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities with his love for the outdoors and specifically the river. Seth is an avid "river rat" who spends as much time on rivers each summer as possible. He even named his son River if that gives you a sense of how much he loves it. Seth has demonstrated all the qualities you would want in a Direct Support Professional. He is loyal, dedicated, reliable, creative, compassionate, kind, generous, organized and detailed in his documentation of it all. Several years ago, our day program offered staff the chance to create a "passion project" where they could develop a program based on their passions outside of work and share with the individuals in service. Seth jumped at the chance. He went to the local parks and recreation to ask how he and a small crew could volunteer to help make the River Front Trail (a series of paved trails spanning over 25 miles running along the Colorado River) a better place to be. He then talked with the River Front Commission (charged with acquiring land, developing trails, ensuring wildlife areas are protected, and promoting education and awareness around ecologic and cultural recreational) and proposed a cleanup and maintenance year-round effort to keep the areas pristine and trash free. He and his crew have since been featured in the Daily Sentinel and recently surpassed the 1,000 bags of trash removed milestone and are going strong. Seth and his crew interact with all those who access these trails, many have come to know the crew through time. Seth has truly created a beautiful, supported community connection that is a high preference activity among those attending day program. He understands the importance of being productive and the feelings of self-worth and self confidence that come from doing something meaningful and he wants all who come through his crew to feel the same way. He is an inspiration to individuals served and their families, providers, co-workers, agency partners, and the community. Seth maintained the River Front Trail crew throughout 2020 during a Pandemic, often only able to provide 1:1 support due to restrictions. His contribution to our Ariel family is in-measurable and he is a shining example of what our profession is and can be. His influence and impact are evident every day.

**Taylor VanAllen**

**Organization:** [A Brighter Community](#)

**Time with ABC:** 7 years

## **Years as a DSP: 7 years**

Taylor VanAllen is a DSP EXTRAORDINAIRE! Taylor joined our team at A Brighter Community (ABC) seven years ago when our company was practically brand new, and he has played a starring role in helping us to successfully achieve our mission of providing a meaningful life to exceptional people.

Taylor is extraordinary for many reasons, including the fact that he found his way into this field quite by accident and simply fell in love with it. Prior to joining our team, Taylor was training to become an EMT. He grew up with a cherished friend who happened to have intellectual and developmental disabilities, so he already “got it”, but he never imagined he would wind up in an industry where he would meet many more friends that would bless his life and where he could bless theirs. He came on board and, like a sponge, he soaked up every bit of information about industry best practices that he could and started putting it all into action as a rookie DSP.

As time marched on, Taylor would go home each day and think of ways to enrich our person-centered programming and troubleshoot challenges with utmost respect for the individuals he was serving. He became adept at devising new strategies for serving our participants so that they could not only achieve their goals but also discover an independence and fulfillment they had never before experienced. Taylor has high expectations for our participants, which is a quality that everyone appreciates... because we all know that low expectations is the one thing that will always place roadblocks and pitfalls on the path to independence. At ABC, we believe that each person has unique gifts, talents and needs, and Taylor models this mindset as he mentors every new staff member who joins our team.

Taylor developed a style of interacting with our participants that is second to none! The fact that he is absolutely hilarious makes him a hit with participants, families, and community members alike. He exudes pure joy which boosts the morale of everyone he encounters, and even the grumpiest among us will wind up smiling and feeling motivated.

Taylor embraces the concept of inclusion and he believes that we all have the right to live, work, and play in our communities. He has developed many beneficial partnerships, including, for example, forging a relationship with the YMCA where he facilitated an opportunity for our participants to teach a weekly cycling class to community members, and another where our participants taught classes at Majestic View Nature Center to elementary school children. Taylor is constantly finding new and exciting venues and activities that promote personal growth, socialization, and a healthy lifestyle. On site, Taylor has taken the lead on developing educational classes that support our weekly themes. He has also facilitated an environment that offers a college-type vibe, and our participants have thrived because of it.

During the past seven years, Taylor has grown into a consummate professional, and he has been instrumental in helping ABC develop its culture of friendship, belonging, inclusion, growth, love, kindness, dignity, and respect – because these are all values that he inherently demonstrates in every aspect of his life. We are beyond grateful that Taylor has made being a DSP his career and not just a job. Let’s face it, Taylor VanAllen is everything a DSP should be...and much, much more.

## **Theresa Bolton**

**Organization:** [Mosaic](#)

**Time with Mosaic:** 14 years

**Years as a DSP:** 14 years

Theresa Bolton has served as a host home provider for 14 years, Theresa has always been drawn to working with medically fragile individuals who need additional love and attention. This passion comes from her work in a previous career as a clinical associate in a hospital. She has said that this work, “means everything. I like to see them smile, help them accomplish their goals, and bring out their personalities - just to make a difference in

someone's life." That is why she specializes in providing care to people who use g-tubes, wheelchairs, and have trouble communicating.

In July 2015, her client Leslie had a stroke that caused her to lose function on the left side of her body. Now she mainly has use of her right hand and needs regular stretching and massaging of her left. Theresa was creative in helping Leslie find ways to meet her fine-motor skills goals in maintaining, and even slightly improving her dexterity. She finds ways to incorporate exercises into daily activities, making them fun and incentivizing Leslie to exercise. Activities like coloring, flipping the pages of a magazine, using the touch screen of her iPad, stirring with a spoon, and even holding the syringe during her g-tube feedings so she can feel like part of her own care.

Before her stroke, Leslie used to enjoy painting using her left hand; the one she can't use anymore. Theresa helps her continue doing an activity she loves through hand-over-hand assistance. When Theresa gives Leslie a pen or paintbrush, she lights up and starts laughing with joy. By doing both typical physical therapy exercises and daily routine changes, Theresa has noticed that Leslie now has the hand strength to pull herself up to the table and open a kitchen drawer with her right hand. It might not seem like much to some, but this is huge for Leslie!

In addition, since moving in with Theresa, we at Mosaic have noticed a significant improvement in Leslie's hygiene and general well-being. Before her stroke, Leslie loved to dress up, wear jewelry, and make her hair look nice. She found a lot of joy in being a girly-girl. This is not something Leslie can do on her own anymore.

With her previous host home provider, Leslie would often show up to her day program with unkempt hair and smelling of smoke. But Theresa goes the extra mile to make Leslie feel good about herself. Even when she hasn't gone to her day program due to the pandemic, Theresa takes time to ensure Leslie is dressed nicely, which makes her feel special.

The most important relationship in Leslie's life is her father, Skip. He is her favorite person in the world. Skip has said "we talk to Leslie on the phone - though she can't respond, Theresa will help, saying 'She has a big smile again' and we can hear Les laughing." Theresa knows how important Leslie's father is to her and makes sure they FaceTime at least once a week. She lights up when they get to see each other, and Theresa shares anecdotes from Leslie's daily life so her parents can feel closer to her. Theresa's leadership qualities really shine in her care for the people she supports. She always is the first one to mention something that Leslie will need and brings the team together to ensure she has all the tools to make it happen. She is self-sufficient. If problems arise, she will let us know; but still does what she can to solve the issues herself. For example, Leslie lost her photo ID and the process to get a new one was incredibly time-consuming. It took several original documents including her birth certificate from her family who don't live in the area, as well as coordination with the state and care team. Theresa took it upon herself to move quickly and efficiently, overcoming several obstacles to help Leslie secure a new ID card. For all of these reasons, and so many more, we believe that Theresa Bolton is an excellent candidate for Alliance's DSP of the Year Award.

### **Scott Leyva**

**Organization:** [Parker Personal Care Homes](#)

**Time with PPCH:** 6.5 years

**Years as a DSP:** 6.5 years

Scott continuously pushes to provide the highest quality supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Bring Scott an idea and by the end of the day, he has a detailed plan for how to carry out even the most difficult to articulate goal. Each morning, Scott's is the first face you see at Jack's Bar and Grill & Steamers Coffeehouse. He arrives to work before 6:00am to check restaurant inventory, prepare food preparation lists, and determine work tasks for all Prep Kitchen employees, including those with disabilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restaurant industry in general had to work twice as hard for half (or less) of the profit. Many restaurant workers quickly became burnt out. And while that may have been true for Scott, it never showed. Without fail, Scott brings an energy to his job that is infectious- in a good way.

Mid- pandemic, it was easy to focus on just getting through the day, but Scott prioritized building for the future. One of Scott's responsibilities is to help assign meaningful job duties to employees with disabilities and teach them how to complete those tasks. When the restaurant business slowed during the pandemic, Scott remembered hearing that our employees with disabilities craved opportunities for promotion and growth at work. He saw an opportunity to teach people new skills and took advantage of it. Scott had the idea to develop a tracking spreadsheet that would enable us to assess our employees' skills in real time, share that information directly with the employee, and identify a clear trajectory for advancement.

In the four months since this tracking system was developed, our employees have flourished. As an example, Scott recognized that one of our employees hit a success barrier. Upon hire, the employee set her goal to work in the bakery. Having never worked in a restaurant before, she went through the regular onboarding process- learning to wash dishes, basic sanitation and food storage knowledge, knife skills, etc. Quickly, she reached her goal and became the restaurant's Assistant Baker. Since she reached that goal, however, the employee stagnated. She was happily making cookies and muffins and scones but had not set another employment goal or grown her skillset. When Scott recognized this, he immediately worked with the employee to identify what came next. The employee shared with Scott that she had a family brownie recipe and would like to try to scale into a larger batch and make for her friends for Christmas. Scott supported her to determine how to increase the quantity the recipe would yield and suggested that the restaurant run a bakery special using her recipe. The brownies sold out on the first day!

What we have found is that our employees with disabilities are now more confident in their skills and abilities at work, thanks to Scott's initiative not only to create a mechanism to track work skills, but also due to his investment in each employee and their individual growth inside our restaurant and in their daily lives. Take, for example, another employee with whom Scott works closely. He had long desired to move from a group home to a host home setting, but never brought it up to his team because he was afraid that he would hear "no" and feel like he failed. Over time, Scott became a mentor to that employee. He would push the employee to ask for new job tasks and work shifts were peppered with role playing on how to have crucial conversations, about work and life. Scott never said, "let's role play now" but instead used organically occurring events, usually sports, to ask "if you lost the big game, how would you react?" or "have you ever thought about reaching a goal THAT BIG? What do you think helped them be most successful?" Now, that employee is happily and successfully living in a host home. How did that transition happen? The employee gives credit to Scott's support, stating "I wouldn't have done it without him."

## **Ursula Mbene**

**Organization:** [Starpoint](#)

**Time with Starpoint:** 23 years

**Years as a DSP:** 3+ years

Ursula was born and raised in Cameroon, a small country located in central and western Africa. At the age of 28, she came to the United States. Once she relocated to Colorado, she randomly came across a job in the newspaper advertising for a Direct Support Professional (DSP). She decided to find out exactly what that job entailed. Having a background in accounting, Ursula thought to herself, "I am trained to know numbers." She accepted the job, knowing this would be a completely new experience. Prior to working at Starpoint, Ursula did not personally know anyone with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Ursula likes challenges and works hard to succeed. When first taking on the role as a DSP, she pushed herself to learn quickly and immediately felt a connection to her new role. She found herself learning things she never imagined she would experience. She became tearful when expressing gratitude toward her longtime supervisor, Yvonne Bustos, for always having faith in her no matter the learning curve. She still has a letter written from Yvonne all those years ago commending her on her dedication to the job.

Currently, Ursula is Starpoint's Special Habilitation Coordinator. Prior to COVID-19, Ursula would not describe herself as being technologically savvy. Once COVID-19 hit and the Day Program was closed, she worked tirelessly at mastering the various ways of teaching over zoom. She initially relied on co-worker and friend, April McManus, for guidance and as her confidence grew, she began teaching herself. She recalls thinking, "I can get it done." It was incredible to observe her dedication to the process of learning a new skill. It wasn't long before you would walk past her classroom and observe her teaching a well-attended and interactive zoom session.

When asked what she learned during the pandemic she replied, "this time has taught us that no matter the circumstance or situation, we can always make things good. We are working it. Zoom has been wonderful."

Ursula has many talents that she shares with the consumers. She likes to cook/bake and makes special meals for the consumers and employees on Thanksgiving and St Patrick's Day. She also hosts tea parties. When asked what her favorite part of the job is she replied, "I love coming up with fun activities and then watching faces light up with excitement." She describes her greatest achievement during her 23 years with Starpoint as being able to walk alongside the individuals with whom she works and observing lives improve and individuals grow. She admires the fact that despite their disability, these individuals continue to strive. Ursula can still recall the names of the individuals she first worked with, of which made her smile.

When asked how she would describe an individual with intellectual and developmental disabilities she replied, "A person with a disability is just like everyone else. He/she is just born differently. I was raised to accept people for who they are and not to look at people as being different." She then went on to say, "working at Starpoint has become the norm for me. It's not like a job, it's just what I do."

Ursula is a strong leader with a giving heart. Family means a lot to her. She volunteers at her church and is currently designing the nursery there. She decorates the church for all of the holiday and also sings soprano in the worship group. She wrote a song entitled, "Love Has No Pride," of which has been made into a record by an artist from New York City. Ursula likes to sew, swim, and especially hike. She loves reading, particularly religious literature. Ursula is a pillar of Starpoint. She truly cares about the people she serves and always strives to be her best to lead by example. Though Ursula was trained to know numbers early in life, her heart now knows much more.