



CLUBHOUSE THAT AIDS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES PROVED TO BE A VOLUNTEER'S KEY TO SUCCESS

Able Trust Grant Supports Miami Nonprofit's Mission

MIAMI, FL. —Mario Ramirez can now look back on the mental health crisis he had in 2010 and say with a smile that everything happens for a reason. Up until that moment he never held a steady job and lived in virtual isolation as he struggled to cope with schizophrenia.

“When you have a mental condition and some people know you have that, it’s a stigma,” said Ramirez. “I wasn’t socially accepted.”

Getting a job and holding it was nearly impossible for him, even though he had a college degree in civil engineering. So he toiled as a painter, making ends meet with the help of this father until he passed away 10 years ago.

But it was that crisis that changed everything for the better, with Ramirez finding himself being in the right place at the right time about a year later. Prescribed a new drug that controlled his mental disorder, Ramirez, 44, felt ready to become a member of society. He began volunteering at The Key Clubhouse of South Florida, a facility that helps people with mental illnesses

learn life skills, find jobs and become meaningful members of society. There he met the Clubhouse’s executive director, Stephanie Solovei, who became a mentor to him.

Supporting The Key Clubhouse’s mission is The Able Trust, a state-funded initiative that seeks to be a key leader in providing Floridians with disabilities opportunities for successful employment. Last March, The Able Trust awarded the Miami-based nonprofit a \$32,000 grant.

For Ramirez, the Clubhouse came to represent a pivotal point in his life. The Key staff helped him apply for a job at Macy’s as the holidays approached, and he got a job as a sales associate. He started on Black Friday, one of the most stressful days to work in retail. He loved the job and was quickly promoted to holiday ambassador, a position that entrusted him with collecting and depositing money.



Then fate smiled on him again only a few months later while he was back at the Clubhouse as a volunteer and still working for Macy's. Leading a group of Department of Children & Families (DCF) workers on a tour, Ramirez so impressed a DCF supervisor with his confidence and bilingual skills that she suggested he apply for a job with the state agency.

He got a full-time position—his first professional job—handling complaints and reports on assisted living facilities. He has been at DCF's Miami office for a year.

“That makes me happy because I'm a contributor to society,” said Ramirez. “I'm empowered to do the things I couldn't do in the past. I always had the will to work, but now I have the confidence to work with people. Confidence is the key.”

A 2010 Harris Interactive survey titled “The ADA, 20 Years Later,” found that only 21 percent of persons with disabilities aged 18–64 are employed full- or part-time, far below the 59 percent reported for persons without disabilities. Ensuring that the underrepresented disability community can find employment appropriate to their background and skills is a top priority of The Able Trust.

About The Able Trust: The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, is a 501(c)(3) public-private partnership foundation established by the Florida Legislature in 1990. Its mission is to be a key leader in providing Floridians with disabilities opportunities for successful employment. Since its establishment, The Able Trust has awarded more than \$29 million throughout Florida, enabling approximately 2,000 Florida citizens with disabilities to enter the workforce each year. The Able Trust youth programs provide career development and transition to almost 2,000 students with disabilities annually, helping to reduce the dropout rate and prepare young adults for life beyond high school.