

Michael & Rico

For 36-year-old Michael White, friendship and care have created a life worth *loving*.

Autism has been no barrier to a life that maximizes self worth, independence and personal choices. But for Michael, none of his many achievements would be possible without the steadfast support provided by his Direct Care Worker, Rico.

Michael has a paying job and lives in his own apartment, thanks to Rico's ongoing assistance. When Rico isn't available to drive him, Michael rides his bike and walks to the store, church, exercise class, swimming and many other activities. He is a member of the Knights Of Columbus and does volunteer work in the Clarkston community.

Rico deserves much of the credit for Michael's ongoing accomplishments and independence. During the past three years, Rico has become a very important part of Michael's life and family. Rico is more than a Direct Care Worker—he is Michael's closest friend.

Due to the low pay Michigan's Direct Care Workers receive, Rico also must work a full-time job five days a week when he's not caring for Michael.

When Rico finishes his eight-hour work day, he makes the journey from Auburn Hills to Clarkston. There, he works another five hours to provide care and assistance to Michael. He is with Michael five hours a day, six days each week.

Rico's support for Michael goes beyond critical or traditional

caregiver responsibilities and includes support that allows Michael to achieve and experience the social determinants of life" that many of us take for granted (e.g., physiological needs, safety & security, self-esteem and self-actualization).

There is a special bond between Michael and Rico that is much more than a DCW relationship,. You can see it when they are together—grocery shopping, at a movie, at the mall, eating in a restaurant, at a Michigan State sporting event, at an OUCARES Adult Social event, at art class...the list goes on and on.

In fact, there are many times that Michael's parents say that, thanks to Rico, Michael's social calendar is a lot more interesting and active than their own.

Michael and his family are fierce advocates, urging the state Legislature to ensure



adequate funding for Direct Care Worker wages. Just as Rico has helped create an amazing life for Michael, the Whites are eager to make life easier for Rico. Increasing his compensation, they believe, is the best possible beginning.

Michael often joyfully offers the impromptu statement, "I love my life!"