



**EMPOWER**

*support services to help you live your best life*

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# core values in action

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ANNUAL REPORT 2016

# Empower's CORE VALUES in Action



Empower's new strategic plan took flight in 2016 and continues through 2018. The plan includes five core values that embody our work: dignity, accountability, excellence, collaboration and leadership. Our board and staff strive to live those values every day. This annual report features some inspiring examples of Empower's core values in action. We hope you enjoy reading about them – and we thank every service participant, donor, funder, partner, volunteer and employee who made them possible. Here's to a great year!

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**Jeff Paterson**  
Chief Executive Officer

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Director of Community Health Programs

Karen Korn  
Medicaid Service Coordination Supervisor

*In memory of  
Dr. Salvatore  
M. Passanese,  
Empower  
Board President,  
1953-2016*





# DIGNITY: Medicaid Service Coordination

*In 2016, Empower's five Medicaid Service Coordinators (MSCs) helped 165 individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) and their families get New York State disability services like respite. In cases where families needed things for which there was no funding, MSCs made sure they did not go without. A grant from the United Way of Greater Niagara Student Fund established the Empower Giving Tree, providing Christmas gifts for MSC families. Also, MSCs were instrumental in enhancing all agency programming to be more person-centered. Underlying the support MSCs provide is the goal of upholding people's dignity and ensuring they feel valued which enables them to fulfill their potential.*

## Empower Giving Tree

Right after Thanksgiving, MSCs set up a holiday tree in the front entrance of the administration building. It was decorated with paper ornaments, each conveying an MSC client's gift wish. Empower staff chose ornaments and purchased items with their own money. This generosity combined with grant funds ensured MSC families had something to open on Christmas morning.



*Empower Giving Tree gifts acquired through grant funds and staff donations*

## Matt M.'s Story

Matt has spinal muscular atrophy and has a weakened immune system which prevents him from being in settings with multitudes of people, including school and public transportation vehicles. Instead, he attended classes virtually and attended graduation at Lewiston-Porter High School in 2016. Through coordinated efforts by Lewport, Matt's MSC and family, Matt received two jumbo-sized computer screens and accompanying programs so he could attend classes and participate via Skype from his home without risk of becoming ill. Money was donated towards the purchase of a van, enabling him to attend his graduation ceremony and to be driven to doctors' appointments by his mom, Cathy, which is safer and more convenient than public transportation.

Matt was given the "Inspiring Individual" award at Empower's Living the Values Lunch, held in October, for his perseverance and dedication to excellence in achieving his dream of graduating high school.



*Cathy and Matt Minderler reading the invitation to Empower's Living the Values Awards Luncheon held in October where Matt received the "Inspiring Individual Award"*

## POMS

In 2015, Empower committed to changing its tradition of defining quality in terms of organizational process and regulatory compliance to Personal Outcome Measures (POMS). POMS were developed by the Council on Quality and Leadership to define, measure and improve the personal quality of life for people with disabilities, people with mental illness and older adults. POMS are determined by the person and their preferences and personal context. Each individual and a person who knows them best (selected by the individual) are interviewed by Empower staff who are certified POMS interviewers. Using twenty-one POMS ranging from good health to feeling supported, interviewers determine what is important to the person and whether or not Empower is actually focusing on these things. Based on this information, supports and services are adjusted or created with follow-up evaluations scheduled to ensure fulfillment.

In 2016, 18 individuals, some of whom receive multiple Empower services, completed POMS interviews that were conducted by 5 staff who were certified POMS interviewers (the breakdown of interviews by division is presented at right.)

## POMS Interviews Completed in 2016

Respite	1 •
Day Hab	2 ••
ICF	1 •
MSC	10 ••••••••
Pre-Voc	13 ••••••••••
Day TX	12 ••••••••••
IRA	5 •••••





# ACCOUNTABILITY: Job Training and Day Programs

In 2016, 250 individuals with disabilities were helped by this division to discover and fulfill their potential, whether it is through finding a job in the community or participating in the day program. Half of those supported do manual jobs such as envelope stuffing. Prior to 2016, this work occurred in a sheltered workshop until the Olmstead Act required that such settings be more integrated.

Empower was the first disability agency in the state to submit a plan outlining its transition of all job training and placement programs to more integrated settings. In addition, this transition will be

finished by the end of 2017, three years ahead of the state's deadline.

A lot was accomplished by this division in 2016 towards the goal of full integration. Most notably, the agency opened Empties for Empower, which is a bottle and can redemption center that provides paid job training to individuals with disabilities. 12 individuals received job training at the site in 2016, learning customer service and money skills while processing 653,622 receptacles.

Throughout the year, Empower promoted this service to the community, who

can opt to receive their full deposit back or donate all or a portion back to the agency. In total, \$3,694 was received back in donations. Another benefit of the site is that it provides increased opportunities for members of the public and workers to interact, achieving the transformation plan's integration goal and increasing awareness and understanding of developmental disabilities.

More than a year has passed since Empties for Empower ribbon cutting, held on an unseasonably warm day last March, but the number of customers and workers' enthusiasm continues to grow.

## Marshaun's Story

Marshaun made significant progress towards his goal of being more independent. In March 2016, he started working at Empties for Empower. At the beginning, Marshaun was shy and filled with self-doubt. He hesitated when greeting new customers and struggled with counting. Marshaun's worksite supervisor, Jill, knew that, with experience, Marshaun would develop his naturally outgoing tendencies that were evident with people he knew. Throughout the year, Jill and Marshaun worked on stretching his confidence, gradually increasing his interactions with new customers as his comfort level grew. Now, when customers come in, Marshaun is the first one to ask them how their day is. Marshaun is ready to get a job and will work with a job counselor on this goal. All of this progress was made possible because of his POMS interviews and committed staff like Jill, for whom Empower advocates through initiatives like bfair2directcare.

In addition to receiving job training services, Marshaun lives in an Empower group home. He both liked the camaraderie of living with his friends and wanted to live independently. Empower's community housing division worked with Marshaun on deciding whether living on his own was what he most wanted. They taught him skills to live independently such as grocery shopping and travel training. They also helped him build his confidence. Ultimately, Marshaun chose to leave his group home and relocate to an apartment in the Geri Rose apartment complex located behind Empower's administration building. Marshaun's friends and Empower support staff are just steps away, ensuring that he has a smooth transition to independence.



**ABOVE:** (L to R) OPWDD Region 1 Deputy Director Kevin Penberthy, former NYS Assemblymember John Ceretto, Empower CEO Jeff Paterson, Santino, Marshaun, NYS Senator Robert Ort and James.

**RIGHT:** Marshaun and Director of Human Resources Kristin Minervini at the Empties for Empower ribbon cutting



Jackie. B, an Empties for Empower customer, says: "I love bringing my returns to Empties for Empower. It is great to see how well the team works together. It's such a wonderful opportunity for the people to have. I also love how well the staff is with the team and with the customers. This place is very clean, pleasant, quick and efficient. I will never go anywhere else."



# EXCELLENCE: Community Housing

Empower's community housing division is composed of dedicated workers who excel at getting to know each individual served and supporting them in achieving what is important to them. On top of their regular duties, staff can choose to become advocates for specific individuals. Staff members get to know the individual better and ensure that the person has everything he/she needs. For example, Ron is non-verbal and relies on a tablet to communicate. His advocate, Eric, makes sure that the tablet is serviced quickly when it breaks, and even comes in on his days off to expedite repairs. Eric understands that without the tablet, Ron is cut off from communicating and never wants Ron to experience that isolation. He describes Ron as his best friend, and says that it is hard on both of them when they cannot interact. Eric also found a creative solution for another individual who is at risk for diabetes and other health problems due to being overweight. This individual loves cars and being outside. Eric is working on getting a tractor tire and putting it in the backyard for this individual to lift, jump through and run around which will increase his activity level, result in weight loss and involve something fun that he enjoys. At all times, Community Housing goes above and beyond to ensure the people it serves receive excellent care.

## Sarah F.'S Story

Sarah has made so much progress in 2016, becoming more independent and outgoing. Working with community housing staff, Sarah developed her confidence. When she was approached about relocating from the group home where she lived with 9 other young people with IDD who need more help from staff on their self-care and activities, Sarah was not sure she could do it at first. Her roommates were her friends and they had lived together for a long time. Like anyone, Sarah drew comfort from the familiar and was ambivalent about the unknown that such a change would pose.

Sarah's prospective roommate is Lynn, who has advanced cerebral palsy and who was receiving services from Empower for years. When Lynn's husband passed away, she could not continue living in her home on her own without supports. Empower bought the home from Lynn, converting it into a certified home with room for one other resident. When Lynn's longtime roommate passed earlier this year, the option of moving was suggested to Sarah.

There was a lot for Sarah to consider before this could happen, though. She would go from living with a lot of people to living with just one, who is considerably older than she is. Also, she would

be transitioning from a site that offered more support to one that required her to be more independent. Finally, she would be moving from the City of Niagara Falls to the Village of Lewiston, a much smaller and quieter community. Would she and Lynn like each other enough to be roommates and would Sarah be able to handle the increased responsibility and the different surroundings? It was clear to Empower staff that Sarah was capable of greater independence, but she had to believe it herself in order for the move to work.

Despite the difference in their ages, Sarah and Lynn hit it off right from the start and became fast friends. With that hurdle down, Sarah tackled the task of building up her

confidence and openness to change. It was not easy, and she showed a lot of courage throughout the decision-making process. Ultimately, Sarah chose to move in with Lynn, trading the familiar for a new friendship and greater independence. Now, Sarah and Lynn are very close. They frequently go out together and spend time talking with each other; this has been a very positive move for both Sarah and for Lynn.

*Lynn and Sarah, friends and roommates*







# EXCELLENCE: Community Housing

## Bfair2directcare

Empower has always attracted a caring and dedicated workforce. However, by 2016, policy decisions made by New York State officials had begun taking their toll. By failing to fund a living wage through adequate reimbursement, New York State has begun to make it difficult for Empower and other agencies to recruit and retain direct care workers. Retention and job satisfaction are essential to quality care.

Since early 2016, Empower has joined other disability service providers across the state to advocate for better wages for direct care workers. Empower is a proud member of the Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State and the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York – two associations that have taken a lead role in an advocacy program called BFair2DirectCare.

In March 2016, Empower hosted a BFair2DirectCare rally. Since then, the campaign has spread like wildfire across the state – resulting in a commitment from Governor Cuomo and state legislators to increase direct care wages beginning in 2018. Empower is proud to have participated in this effective campaign.



*bfair2directcare rally held at Empower in March*



## Overnight Respite

In addition to overseeing eleven residences located throughout Niagara County, Community Housing is also responsible for supporting individuals who live with family or on their own in the community. In 2016, a new community housing program called overnight respite was introduced. The program provides more extensive relief to caregivers who have put off taking a trip or who just need some time away.

Through a partnership with Niagara County Community College, Empower brought 12 individuals with IDD to stay in dormitories for a night or two. There, just like a typical sleepover, individuals play games, watch movies and have fun with peers. This time away strengthens family relationships, provides relief to caregivers and gives participants the chance to interact with people other than their family.

*Crystal W. celebrated her birthday with friends at overnight respite*



## COLLABORATION: Community Health Services

Empower's Community Health division provided 369 individuals -- with and without disabilities -- with dental, audiology, physical therapy, podiatry and wheelchair services in 2016. Several operational and service improvements were put into place this year which resulted in enhanced patient care, better allocation of resources and necessary cost-savings for the agency.

The dental clinic had been slowly losing patients over the years until there were not enough to cover the times scheduled for the two dentists who provided services. Further, a multi-office pediatric dental practice opened and had the capacity to care for all of Empower's dental patients. Pediatric dentists specialize in dental care for children and individuals with special needs. With fulfillment of patients' dental needs assured, Empower closed the dental clinic on June 30, 2016.

In the audiology clinic, Empower replaced aging equipment with devices that measure hearing in different parts of the ear and built a testing chamber that is completely sound proof to ensure testing accuracy with a grant from the Yahoo Community Benefit Fund. This upgrade enhances the hearing services Empower provides to its patients. In addition, Empower began contracting with Buffalo Hearing and Speech Center (BHSC) to provide audiology services. BHSC has been helping men, women and children overcome communication disorders for nearly sixty years. Audiologists hold hearing clinics at Empower at least twice a week, but this schedule can be adjusted based on patient numbers, ensuring that expenses do not exceed income.

### Barbara M.'s Story

Barbara has been an audiology patient for about two years. Barbara also works as a nurse for Empower, so she knows more than most patients do about medical instruments and treatment techniques.

Since the new equipment was installed, Barbara said her hearing assessments have been more precise, ensuring that she can hear better between appointments. She also noted the improvement in care since Buffalo Hearing and Speech audiologists came on board, adding that she is never kept waiting to be seen and that during appointments, her doctor is always professional and knowledgeable and both asks her lots of questions and makes time to answer her questions.

*Barbara M. works as a registered nurse in Empower's Community Housing Division and is an audiology patient*







# LEADERSHIP: Children's Academy

Empower understands that an attitude of acceptance is most likely to persist if it is instilled early in life. That is why its preschool also offers integrated classes to typically-developing children. In 2016, the number of enrollees who are typically-developing more than tripled, from 5 to 19. Through the experience of learning alongside one another, preschoolers with a disability and typically-developing children gain empathy and understanding in addition to learning the fundamentals.

The sensory room is an integral component of the occupational therapy the school provides to preschoolers with a disability. It delivers stimulation to those with sensory-processing disorders so that they can return to their classrooms refreshed and ready to learn. But, this benefit is helpful and used by all students, including those that are typically-developing. With a grant from The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation,

the room was completely renovated, restoring broken equipment such as the therapeutic bubble columns and adding items like the squeeze machine which provides pressure to students that need it.

Students' parents who work, including Empower staff, requested that the Children's Academy add before- and after-school care for their children. Answering this need, three hours of care and instruction were added to the Children's Academy day, extending services from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day.

The Niagara community, and especially families of children with autism, benefited from evening and weekend programming put on at the school. Empower and partner agencies established a facilitated autism support group where families who share the experience of having a child on the spectrum meet, exchange ideas and provide emotional support to one another.

The space is also used for theater workshops that improve the social skills of children with autism and for workshops for siblings of children with special needs, which, like the autism support group, provides a forum for them to work through their feelings with others who share their experience.

The Children's Academy exemplified excellence in 2016 through the expansion of students, hours and space utilization, and looks forward to continuing this momentum of innovation in 2017.

Barb D. says: "My grandson goes to the Children's Academy. What a difference. He is talking more, in sentences. We are amazed by the work they do. He is interacting more, has a couple of best friends. The teachers are great. He melts my heart. He sings to me. I am so grateful for the Children's Academy, for the teachers and for him."

## Leah B. and Maria B.'s Story

When Leah started at the Children's Academy, she was shy and quiet. Her grandma, Mary, has worked here for many years, and knows first-hand how beneficial the school's positive atmosphere and resources are to students. She wanted Leah's introduction to school to be a positive one, and knew that by attending the Children's Academy, Leah would be assured a lifetime love of learning.

Maria is in her third and final year at the Children's Academy. During her time here, Maria has gained confidence and learning to be kindergarten-ready. Intuiting that newer students may need welcoming, Maria always is encouraging and offering comfort to her fellow classmates.

Sensing that Leah needed to be drawn out of her shell a bit, Maria sought her out, smiling and talking to her often. Now, Leah is the person that Maria talks to most. They are best friends, and hold hands when they walk together in the hallways or on the playground. According to Maria's teacher, Michele Senay, the two have "one of the strongest bonds I have ever seen in my time as a teacher."

Supporting children of all abilities in their social, emo-

tional and cognitive development so that when they graduate, they are ready for kindergarten and beyond is what the Children's Academy is exemplary at, and why they signify Empower's value of leadership.

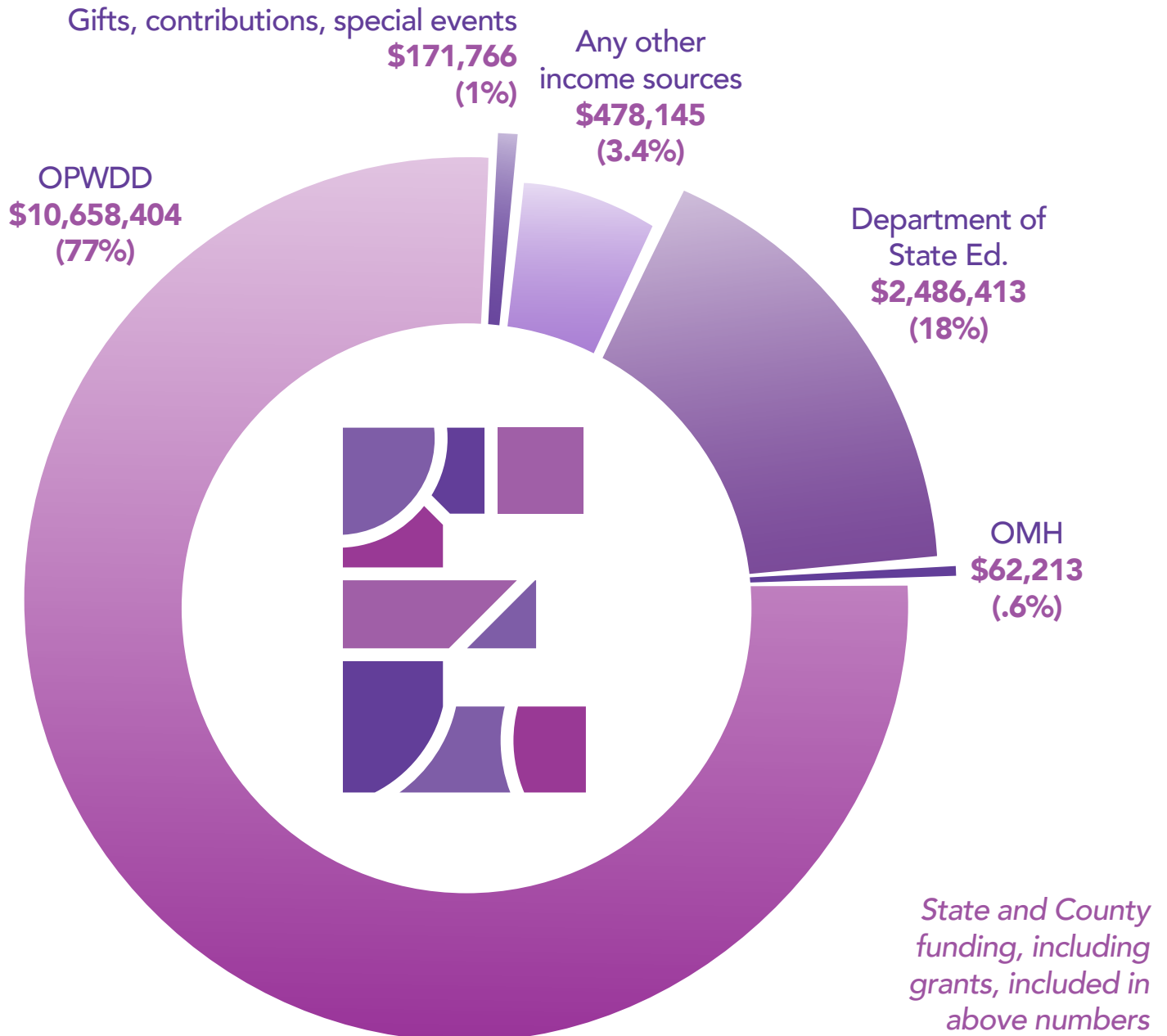
*Maria and Leah in Ms. Michele's classroom*





# 2016 FINANCIAL REPORT

**INCOME \$13,856,941**



**EXPENSES \$13,757,499**



# 2016 FACTS AND FIGURES

The Empower rebranding effort was recognized by the Public Relations Society of America's Buffalo/Niagara chapter with the **Best in Show** award

Empower was honored as **Employer of the Year** by the Town of Niagara Business and Professional Association.

Average staff tenure is **9 years**. Programs such as Living the Values, in which staff nominate co-workers for embodying the agency's core values, contribute to staff retention and satisfaction.

Empower's vacancy rate for direct care workers is **10%**, roughly half the state average.

Children's Academy private pay students more than **tripled** in 2016.

**300+** staff

**18** individuals completed Personal Outcome Measures interviews, accounting for 180 staff hours

There was an **86.73% increase** in the public's regard for the agency, as measured by the annual reputation survey.

**700% increase** in agreement to the statement "Empower tends to outperform other organizations that provide similar services" that is part of the reputation survey

**150** people attended a #bfair2directcare rally at Empower in March in support of a living wage for direct care workers. Follow-up calls were made by staff, individuals and family members to legislatures on this issue.

Direct care workers receive **105 hours of training** prior to working on their own with individuals with IDD

# 2016 CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to the following generous donors, who contributed to Empower in 2016:

## \$0-\$249

Joanna Barber  
Mark Briglio, Kiwanis Club  
of Lewiston  
Stephanie Burns  
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Univera Healthcare  
VSCO, Inc.

# SPECIAL EVENTS

## 2016 Snowflake Basket Auction

Almost \$16,000 was raised for Empower programs and services at the 7th Annual Snowflake Basket Auction held at the Elks Lodge on March 18 and 19. Over 250 baskets, gift certificates, lottery tickets and cash to purchase these items were donated by Empower staff, Board members, families of service recipients and local businesses who then gathered over the two days, scouting favorite items and catching up with friends while eating delicious food and waiting patiently to see if they won. It is a fabulous event that improves each year and as a result has developed quite the following. A huge thank you to everyone who contributed and attended. Auction proceeds were used to provide basic supplies for MSC families and to send people to Camp Happiness over the summer.



*Left: NYS Senator Robert Ort received the 2016 Chairman's Award for his advocacy on behalf of developmental disabilities*

## 24th Annual Matthew J. Murphy, Jr. Memorial Drive Fore Empower Golf Tournament

It was actually sunny for this year's golf tournament held at the Niagara Frontier Country Club on June 27. Golfers teed off, enjoying the beautiful surroundings and good company while supporting a good cause. Cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and dinner were followed by the presentation of the Chairman's Award. Emcees Jack Armstrong, John Murphy and Keith Radford auctioned off several premium items, excursions, signed sports items and golf items. The winner of the signed and framed Hasek jersey was announced and basket auction winners were also called. In total, the event raised over \$15,000 for Empower's Job Training and Day Programs division. Thank you to everyone who participated!

## Living the Values Awards Luncheon

Empower held its first external awards lunch, called Living the Values, on October 14 at the Four Points by Sheraton. Eight awards were given to individuals, businesses and organizations that embody Empower's five core values: excellence, leadership, accountability, collaboration and dignity. Videos about each awardee were shown in advance of the award presentations and remarks. The entire event, from the unique "E" awards to the inspiring stories of empowerment, was truly special. Thanks to everyone who attended. We look forward to seeing you again in October for the 2nd Annual Living the Values Awards Luncheon.

### 2016 Living the Values Award Recipients

#### **Empower Values Excellence:**

##### **2016 Inspiring Individual Award**

Matthew Minderler

#### **Empower Values Leadership:**

##### **2016 Leading Luminary Award**

Mark Laurrie, Superintendent, Niagara Falls City School District

#### **Empower Values Leadership:**

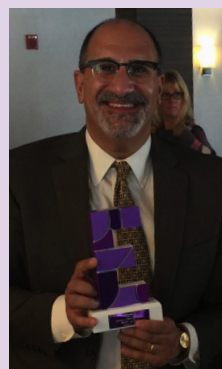
##### **2016 Junior Leading Luminary Award**

Charles Dieteman, Student, Lewiston-Porter Middle School

#### **Empower Values Accountability:**

##### **2016 Faithful Funder Award**

The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation



*Left: Niagara Falls City School District Superintendent Mark Laurrie*

*Right: Empower CEO Jeff Paterson and Tower Foundation Executive Director Tracy Sawicki*

#### **Empower Values Collaboration:**

##### **2016 Priceless Partner Award**

The Parent Network of Western New York

#### **Empower Values Dignity:**

##### **2016 Exceptional Employer Award**

C & W Services

#### **Empower Values Dignity:**

##### **2016 Committed Contractor Award**

Matrix Imaging Solutions, Inc.

Awardee videos can be viewed at: <http://empower-wny.org/news-events/2016-living-the-values-awardee-videos>





**EMPOWER**

*support services to help you live your best life*

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