

THE BRIDGE TO INDEPENDENCE

Agency: SMILES (Southern MN Independent Living Enterprises & Services)

Programs: Assistive Technology and Recreation

Services include:

- Assistive technology resource center (where consumers can learn about and see what's available),
- Technology lending library (where consumers can try out equipment before investing in purchasing it),
- Assistive technology assessments & training (including installation, configuration, & learning to operate)
- Residential ramp construction;
- Recreational activities like adaptive baseball, downhill bi-skiing, etc

Impact: In 2009, SMILES provided 707 hours of 1:1 and small group assistive technology training, provided 158 consumers access to technology through its resource center and lending library, and provided 62 adaptive bi-ski lessons.

This is one girl's personal story with support from SMILES through funding from United Way.

Hello. My name is Megan. I am fifteen years old and have a vision impairment. My hobbies are reading, talking to friends, and – of course, skiing!

When I was eleven years old, one of my best friends told me she had been skiing for years and how much fun it was. I thought that skiing sounded pretty fun, but figured I would never get to do it because of my vision impairment.

But then, my mom got a SMILES newsletter about the Mankato Area Adaptive Ski Program in the mail.

I was really nervous at first. But on the first day, the volunteers worked a lot with me. One volunteer would hold my hands and ski backward so that I would feel more comfortable.

That was five years ago. I have been skiing ever since and absolutely love it! My very favorite thing to do on Sundays and Tuesdays is to go out to Mount Kato and ski with the awesome, amazing volunteers from the program. They have patiently kept on teaching me new skills, even when I thought I would never understand what they were trying to tell me.

This program means a lot to me. It makes me happy to be able to go out and



ski every week, just like I could if I were sighted. I love rushing down the hills with the wind in my face and knowing that because I am so expertly guided, I will almost certainly make it down the hill safely.

Because of the program, I feel a lot more confident. I have finally found an area in which I have real talent.

What if you had a loved one with a disability and there was no organization in place that already “knew the ropes”, that had equipment and networks available that you could just tap into? Greater Mankato Area United Way’s funding ensures that programs like these are available in our community.