

By Jaidree Braddix
For The Tribune

To walk into Connections for Independent Living's downtown Greeley location is to be greeted with brightly colored walls, open communal spaces, inspirational posters, a friendly smile and an introduction to Flash, the excitable blue betta fish. A warm welcome is only the beginning; the staff members at Connections for Independent Living work tirelessly to help people with any type of disability to gain the self-confidence, legal aid and funds necessary to live independently. Beth Danielson, executive director at Connections, said one of the best things about the agency is that it encourages people with disabilities to feel optimistic about having a family, a job, a home and an active role in their communities. "There's just so much focus on a person's limitations," Danielson said. "But really, there's always more potential than limitation." One person Connections is helping is Machel Pacheco. She was injured in a car crash about two years ago that left her with head injuries and multiple broken bones in her left leg and hip. Pacheco also has osteoarthritis, which was severely aggravated by the crash. Pacheco was denied Social Security Disability benefits every time she applied. At first she was even denied her Aid for the Needy and Disabled. "With SSDI, I'm just trying to get benefits that I worked for all my life," Pacheco said. "The reason why they denied me the last time is because they said if I could care for my grandson, I could go to work." When Katie Harper, an independent living specialist at Connections, met Pacheco, she saw a woman who was struggling with her bills, her injuries and the constant rejections from Social Security, but was still able to make time to babysit her 8-year-old grandson. Harper became Pacheco's advocate, and, working as a team, they were able to turn Pacheco's life in a more positive direction. Pacheco now receives a monthly check from Aid for the Needy and Disabled and will be receiving a free hip replacement within the next couple of months. Connections still helps Pacheco with her bills in times of need, such as when her car was recently stolen and wrecked, and Pacheco said she can always call or visit when she needs emotional support. Connections for Independent Living is one of eight agencies receiving help from the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund, which provides resources for local human service agencies dedicated to helping community members struggling to meet basic needs. Harper said Pacheco is a marvelous and dedicated person who always appreciated what was being done for her. "I like to think of people as gifts. Some people are wrapped in beautiful wrapping, their packages are wrapped great, and some people have broken and torn wrappings." Harper said. "You never want the wrappings. You always want the gift that's in the box."