Turning disabilities into abilities
Sheltered workshops build self-esteem and pride with employment

by Jim McCarty
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At first glance, it looks no different than the other factories based in Sullivan’s industrial park. Tractor-trailers back up to docks, their drivers waiting for the trailers to be loaded. Inside, it’s a beehive of activity. Assembly lines whirl, carrying brightly colored cans. A forklift driver beeps a warning that he’s bringing another load to the dock. Employees prepare packaging, remove empty boxes and make sure the workers on the line have what they need. Occasionally, a supervisor checks the work to make sure it’s up to standards.

There’s one big difference here. Most of the employees at Sheltered Industries of the Meramec Valley would have a tough time being hired anywhere else. This is a sheltered workshop, one of 91 in Missouri that have what they need. Occasionally, a supervisor checks the work to make sure it’s up to standards.

There’s one big difference here. Most of the employees at Sheltered Industries of the Meramec Valley would have a tough time being hired anywhere else. This is a sheltered workshop, one of 91 in Missouri that together employ more than 7,000 people with disabilities and generate $90 million in income.

Sheltered workshops are small, not-for-profit corporations overseen by a local board of directors. While similar businesses function to make a product and earn a profit, the outcome at a sheltered workshop is to provide jobs and the self-esteem that comes with them for those living with a disability.

Eric Giebler, CEO of the Sullivan workshop, puts it another way. “Yes, they have a disability. But we work to find their abilities. The idea is everyone has productive capacity. What we do is find a way of working with an individual that can harness that capacity and find the best way to allow them to work.”

There’s a big difference between Missouri’s sheltered workshops and those in most other states. When the program got started with legislation passed in 1965, the state adopted a business model instead of a medical model. This means the state puts far less funding into the program, instead requiring the workshops to be as self-sufficient as possible.

“Our goal is to have 70 to 75 percent of our operating budgets come from our contract sales,” says Bob Koch, manager of Sheltered Workshops Inc. in Washington and head of the Missouri Association of Sheltered Workshop Managers. The rest of their income comes from state funding, personal property taxes under Senate Bill 40 and occasional donations.

Given the difficult economy, sheltered workshops across the state constantly struggle to find enough business to keep their employees working. That’s particularly true for the workshops located in rural areas.

Reynolds County Sheltered Workshop Inc. in Bunker is one of these. “There’s nothing here,” Manager Janis Gordon says of the workshop’s location. “Some of the workshops along the highway or closer to big towns have big contracts, packaging jobs. That would be great. But the job situation here, even for non-challenged people, is tough. That’s why we do 50 jobs instead of two.”

This workshop, located in a former grocery store and served by Black River Electric Cooperative, focuses on woodworking and sewing, among other things. Janis and her small staff of supervisors work to bring out the creative side of the employees.

Some do beautiful embroidery on quilt blocks that are sold online or in the workshop’s retail store. Others make insulated well houses that were in high demand this summer as new drought-relief wells were dug. Other products the workshop’s employees have crafted include purses, quilts, signs, picnic tables, wood strips for a railroad tie plant in Bunker and blocks and ore sample bags for the lead mines operated by The Doe Run Co.

A new project made at the workshop is beehives, which the staff hopes will bring in income while restoring the bee population so vital for crops.

But finding work isn’t the only challenge for sheltered workshop managers. They must find ways to bring out the best in a workforce other industries would not employ.

“For them to be employed here, they have to be certified by the Division of Vocational Education, and that certification basically says they are unemployable in other competitive employment settings,” says Eric. “A lot are very employable. It’s just that the level of training and assistance they are going to need for quite a while is probably more than most companies are willing to do.”

Those challenges range from developmental disabilities to mental illness to physical disabilities. “We have to be patient,” says Reynolds County’s manager. “We’ve had a few supervisors in the past that this wasn’t the
workshop also collects and bundles paper products and clothes. This Boonslick Industries in Boonville warehouses.

It maintains a fleet of trucks and specializes in packaging and metal finish-

certified for quality by the Interna-
tional Standards Organization, spe-

The Sullivan workshop, which is for local businesses and can heat treat jobs ranging from changing caps on aerosol cans to doing yard work.

For example, Washington's sheltered workshop builds custom pallets for local businesses and can heat treat them for shipment overseas.

The Sullivan workshop, which is certified for quality by the International Standards Organization, specializes in packaging and metal finish-

shoes for recycling or reconditioning.

Sheltered Industries Inc. in Boonville, gives some encourage-

quires you," she says. "They will do the most beautiful job today, but tomorrow they can't do it. Maybe a day or two later, they can do it again."

To keep their doors open and their employees working, the state's sheltered workshops do a wide variety of jobs ranging from changing caps on aerosol cans to doing yard work.

The injury left him unable to remember things. But years of rehabilita-

ment to Stan Emmerich as he sorts paper for recy-

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Another misconception is that sheltered workshop employees don’t mind doing repetitive tasks. Bob says his employees enjoy new jobs just like any other worker would.

That's one reason his facility and his job at the sheltered workshop brought him to the point where he now works independently taking care of the welcome center.

"I've never seen a job where you can go from handicapped worker to supervisor," says Tim, who still forgets but carries a notebook and phone to jog his memory. "I was like, wow, I have a chance. I am working like a regular individual. I am happy now."

Those who operate the state's sheltered workshops must deal with a number of misconceptions. One of these is that workshops offer services cheaper than for-profit businesses.

"That's not necessarily the case," says the Sullivan workshop's manager. "We try to sell on the quality of our work, delivery, those types of things."

Adds Washington's Bob Koch, "What's important as well is the ability to pick it up and process and get it back to them. Also, a lot of times they will want you to store or inventory the product. We provide those services as well."

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