

A partnership with vision

Louisville company helps create jobs for vision impaired

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Lisa Schaeffer of Rocky Mountain RAM in Lafayette. (MARK LEFFINGWELL)

When Rudy Vanemon lost most of his vision at age 45, he thought he also lost his independence, career and even the hobbies that brought him joy.

But thanks to a partnership with a Boulder County computer-memory company, Vanemon and dozens of other visually impaired people across the country now have a chance to reclaim their lives.

Vanemon, who says he's from the "Jersey Shore," had been painting postal trucks for 13 years when he became legally blind from complications related to diabetes. For five years, he tried to learn how to live again with his new condition. Unable to paint anymore, he applied for other jobs.

"But when they hear you're blind, they're not really interested," he says.

In fact, 70 percent of Americans who are blind are unemployed or underemployed, according to Bob Garrett, president and CEO of Pennsylvania-based North Central Sight. In 2007, the company landed a contract with the government and fused a partnership with Louisville-based Rocky Mountain Ram to manufacture flash drives that help the blind.

"Let's face it. Although with computers, it's made life a whole lot easier because we can access information through screenwriting devices, there's still a lot of negative societal viewpoints on people who are blind," Garrett says.

He understands firsthand. Garrett lost his vision at age 5 from a rare form of cancer. But he says he always held himself to the same expectations of people who can see -- maybe higher. He graduated high school, majored in college and began applying for dozens of jobs.

"They were pleased with my qualifications, and I can talk on the phone with the best of them," he says. "But there was no interest after they realized I could not see. Unfortunately, that happens a lot."

Eventually, he landed a job as a caseworker at North Central Sight, visiting other blind people at their homes and telling them about support services available. North Central Sight provides services for people who are completely blind or legally blind, which means their vision cannot be corrected better than 20/200.

"What I figured out pretty quickly was if you found someone who was motivated and you could provide a job for them, you could solve a lot of their other problems," Garrett says. "You don't have anything to do; you're limited because you have to wait for others to take you where you want to go. It makes it difficult to have independence, and an income, too."

Rocky Mountain Ram manufactures parts for flash drives that are sent to Pennsylvania, where as many as several dozen (depending on production demands) visually impaired people put them together, test functionality, pack, label and shelve



Different forms of hard drives and flash drives from Rocky Mountain RAM in Lafayette. (MARK LEFFINGWELL)

the products to be shipped. North Central's facility offers a few modifications, but it holds the workers to the same standards as anyone else, Garrett says.

In fact, even the fully blind workers do their job "with the best of them," Garrett says. They are functional, intelligent and motivated; they only have limited sight.

Lisa Schaeffer, the founder and owner of Rocky Mountain Ram, says the partnership with North Central Sight is one of the most successful assignments that North Central has had. She says the workers manufacture millions of flash drives every year.

"They can assemble the parts faster than I can," she says.

Which benefits Rocky Mountain Ram, too.

"Their success is our success in sales," Schaeffer says. "It's always a good business to form partnerships that are win-win on both sides. Sometimes people forget that side of business. But when you have a win-win partnership, it's a relationship that lasts and is very successful."

Vanemon, of New Jersey, says he doesn't know what his life would be like today if he hadn't landed the job at North Central Sight manufacturing flash drives in 2007.

"My life would be pretty bad right now," he says. "I don't know if I'd have a job. I'd probably be sitting at home."

With the extra income, Vanemon has once again picked up his lifelong passion of playing billiards. He stopped playing for about five years, thinking he couldn't do it ever again. But he figured it out.

Today, he runs multiple pool leagues and competes regularly.

He says he was a pretty good player before, and although he can't play like that anymore, he can hold his own, and he's proud of it.

"It gives you a reason for going on," he says. "Otherwise, you are just wondering if your life is worth living."

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