

Center teaches job skills to blind

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n Several blind Albany workers received their first paychecks from an Albany employer for the visually impaired last week.

ALBANY — It was during an afternoon break Tuesday at Albany Advocacy Resource Center that 28-year-old Lequinton Barner picked up his first check as a worker.

Barner, legally blind, got a job working for Georgia Industries for the Blind making file folders in mid-June. He picked up his first-ever paycheck Tuesday.

"It's really a good job," he said after showing how the folders are made. "All of us get along (and) joke around while we're making folders."

Barner is one of eight blind or visually-impaired workers who started June 16 with GIB making folders at its Albany location, in the AARC building on Pine Avenue, said Georgia Department of Labor Manufacturing Director Kevin Kelley.

To make folders, Barner secures a single folder in a metal contraption on a desk, then adds more folder pages using adhesive strips. He produces about 400 of the six-page folders a day, he said, cranking several of them out during his demonstration.

Barner described his vision as simply a blur, adding that he was unable to make out details of a person's face who was standing in front of him.

He said he lost his vision after high school because of high blood pressure, which caused fluid to build up behind his eyes.

Because each of the employees have varying degrees of blindness, Barner said they each face different challenges.

"All of us have to learn our own way of making the folders and adjusting to it," he said.

The partnership began when AARC and GIB officials first discussed getting some Albany employees involved with GIB's Bainbridge plant. But when AARC representatives volunteered to provide the facilities at which workers could make folders, GIB officials agreed, putting the Albany operation under the Bainbridge plant manager's oversight.

The Albany plant produces about 3,000 folders a day, manager Mike Jackson said.

To help the visually-impaired workers prepare for the work, many of whom have never held a job, the AARC took them through vocation rehabilitation, which began earlier this year, AARC Employability Program Director Robert Joyner said.

The program teaches them the importance of being on time for work, maintaining their health, personal hygiene and more, he said.

"What we did here was we taught them the importance of coming to work on time. We taught them the importance of maintaining their health," Joyner said. "We taught them the importance of being a contributing member of society. We pointed out and enhanced their abilities.

"It's not about disability. It's about their ability."

The workers at the Albany plant are considered state workers and receive state benefits, averaging about \$8 an hour.

GIB is a nonprofit manufacturing organization that operates about 94 percent of its budget from what it makes off its products, Kelley said. The rest of the budget comes from the Department of Labor, and it is operated by the department.

Kelley said he hopes the plant will relocate to West Broad Avenue within a few months, though a specific date has not been set. Seven additional workers are in training to work at the Albany facility.

Department of Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond said in a Friday news release that the expansion comes at an "opportune time."

"We are extremely proud of Georgia Industries for the Blind's commitment to Georgians who are blind. This expansion comes at a most opportune time given today's economy," he said in the release.

GIB's main plants are in Bainbridge and Griffin, Kelley said.

As for Barner, he says he's proud to hold his first job since 2000, when he graduated high school, and plans to go back to school for a college degree.

"It feels good to be earning money and not having to be dependent on getting a check for SSI (social security income), being self-dependent ... and stuff like that," he said.

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