

# WORKING

When Paulette Gee held her son Jeffrey for the first time, she felt overcome by dreams and wishes for his promising future. But no more than six months later, she felt her dreams had been ripped apart when the unexpected occurred and Jeffrey was diagnosed with bacterial meningitis. The illness took an otherwise healthy boy and transformed his life, causing damage in his brain that would render him susceptible to frequent and violent seizures. Gee faced the tough questions any parent dreads: Where would her son go from here and could this negatively impact his life and forever maim a happy future?

# { to change lives }

BY BRANDY WOODS SNOW | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NILL SILVER PHOTOGRAPHY

Years ago, a disability of this magnitude could presumably thwart one's career and quality of life before they'd even begun to live. And though there have been bumps along the way, today Jeffrey has found his niche in the workplace and in life through the support from his family, as well as from organizations and businesses dedicated to helping disabled citizens overcome obstacles and find success.

Jeffrey is certainly not alone. According to the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD), "People with disabilities are one of the nation's most significant employee resources but represent its greatest unemployed minority. Almost 350,000, or 14 percent, of S.C. citizens are in this category." Many of these could work but are held back due to concerns and even misconceptions about their abilities. It is the mission of several community organizations and businesses to offer them an opportunity to find greater joy and better their lives

through work. Many feature a holistic approach that goes beyond job placement to also include a range of services from counseling to interview readiness to employment maintenance techniques and beyond. Additionally, these organizations can also help would-be employees dealing with substance abuse issues or parole obligations, as well as folks simply "down on their luck," find perfectly suited, upstanding jobs to get back on their feet.

North American Rescue Products (NAR) is a strong advocate of the quality of craftsmanship and dedication demonstrated by disabled persons given the chance to prove themselves in the workplace. When Jim Carino, Chief Operations Officer, first came on board with NAR in January of 2005, it was a small but quickly growing company, but, as growth occurred, increased production schedules required more skilled help and larger facilities to meet demand. Carino drew on his past positive experience with the SCVRD, joining forces with them to meet both personnel and spatial requirements.

The alliance with SCVRD allowed NAR to increase investment into the manufacturing of their line of combat life-saving equipment without incurring the costs associated with leasing out or building a larger facility. SCVRD willingly worked with NAR to ensure a



Robert Castellani, owner of North American Rescue

mutually beneficial agreement, allowing them to use 5,000 square feet of VRD space if disabled persons were used to fulfill jobs. After several years, facility changes and a continued demand increase, NAR has settled in Greer with VRD taking lessee space as a work center where they continue to provide assembly services. NAR has been so pleased with the quality and skill of the supplied personnel that they have brought on several people as full-time employees.

David Turnipseed, SCVRD Area Supervisor for Greenville County/Easley says, "North American Rescue provides SCVRD clients with invaluable training opportunities in high quality production positions that prepare them for re-entry into the modern workplace."

On average, about 40-45 VRD "clients" work with NAR. Carino says that having disabled workers completing their products in a routine environment has led to increased quality due to an unparalleled accountability and pride in workmanship. "When I first came on at NAR, I remember owner Robert Castellani saying that we are all abundantly blessed and that the goal in our business is to help those in need. That left an impression on me."



says Carino. "In my years involved with SCVRD, I've seen first-hand the impact made in the lives of these folks and how they've blossomed and secured a career outside of government assistance. It's awesome to see their renewed sense of self and independence coming through."

"When given the opportunity to work in various capacities with local businesses, our clients not only gain training in the basics of work world demands but also fulfill their desire to do meaningful work and be successful. This is the culmination of our mission to return local residents into competitive employment," says Turnipseed.

SCVRD works to treat the whole person with a comprehensive four-part plan embracing diagnosis and treatment; counseling and guidance; rehabilitation and education; and job placement and retention. The SCVRD has 24 work training centers statewide that offer an outstanding alternative to industries in need of assistance completing jobs considered labor intensive or too costly to complete in-house. The Greenville County VRD is currently serving more than 2,500 active clients and successfully placed more than 800 people back to work in FY2008. They supply services to 35-40 various businesses in the county.

In 2007-2008, SCVRD helped clients receive jobs in these major industries:

<b>Service</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Clerical/Sales</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Professional/Management/Technical</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Construction</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Agriculture</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>14%</b>



# The Bottom Line:

## SCVRD Offers a Great Return on Investment



- Clients become tax payers instead of tax consumers
- Clients decrease reliance on government-provided benefits
- Clients may be eligible for health benefits with their new employers, reducing reliance on Medicaid
- Competitively employed clients pay back \$3.20 in taxes for every \$1 spent on their rehabilitation
- Employed clients realize a \$12.78 increase in earnings for every \$1 of Vocational Rehabilitation funds invested in them
- Employed clients repay the cost of their vocational rehabilitation in an average of 5.6 years. That's a 17.8 percent annual rate of return on taxpayer investment.

*\*Figures provided by SCVRD's Breakthrough publication, 2009*

Most impressively, upon referral the mean weekly earnings (72 percent had no earnings reported) of each client were approximated at \$111. After rehabilitation, the mean increased to \$375 per week.

Other valuable VRD services include job retention programs, substance abuse treatment, community work experience that enables clients to “try out” job positions on a trial basis in order to allow for assessment of future potential, and Skilled Workforce Apprenticeship Training (SWAT) that allows perfectly suited clients to work under mentorship on-site to become competent in all required skill sets.

“There are numerous advantages to enlisting the VRD’s assistance, and it’s a win-win-win for the company, the client and the community,” says Turnipseed. “Our clients get the second chance they’re looking for, the business gets a well-trained, pre-screened employee with an entire support network behind them and the community sees one less person dependent on the system for survival.” According to the VRD, tax credits are available to businesses hiring disabled persons, including the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, a federal tax credit up to \$4,800 per each new hire.

The SCVRD also offers youth programs, helping young adults segue from schooling into the workplace as seamlessly as possible. The High School/High Tech (HS/HT) program encourages students to focus on career paths in science, technology, English and math and allows for hands-on shadowing activities. The S.C. Youth Leadership Forum is an annual program instructing juniors and seniors in career choice and leadership training. Disability Mentoring Day matches disabled students with potential employers for hands-on shadowing opportunities.

Goodwill Industries of the Upstate/Midlands likewise seeks to help people with barriers overcome and succeed through the power of work. Expanding beyond the disabled to also serve the downtrodden and less fortunate, Goodwill helps people gain the knowledge and skills to be successful through a plethora of job training and placement programs.

Photos on pages 38-39: SCVRD workers learn specific marketable skills in their work with North American Rescue.



Available training programs run three weeks to six months depending upon discipline and include certified nursing assistant (CNA), retail, food service, fork lift driving and more. Other classes offer English as a second language and basic computer literacy.

Founded in 2002, Goodwill's Job Connection helps a broad range of people locate and obtain employment. "Job Connection is an employment resource in the broadest sense," says Crystal Hardesty, Goodwill Upstate/Midlands Director of Marketing and Public Relations. "There is an employment specialist on site at each Job Connection to assist with internet navigation, securing job leads, writing and formatting resumes, and fine-tuning work readiness skills such as budgeting and finance. We are focused on helping people be successful once employed." There are currently nine Job Connections open with one more scheduled to open in Spring 2010.

During the past fiscal year, Goodwill helped 17,849 people with job training and placement needs with at least 2,839 becoming employed as a direct result of Goodwill services. Collectively, these employees have the potential earning power of \$47 million during the course of the first year of work. Impressively, an estimated 102,204 hours of labor

is provided each week by individuals placed in employment. Goodwill has placed qualified employees in a variety of industries, including healthcare, administrative/professional, food service/hospitality, and manufacturing/industrial.

"The intangible benefits of being able to give people a hand in getting back on their feet and watching them change and evolve is truly a remarkable experience," says Hardesty. "You can see a person emerge who wants to achieve and has that drive for success. It's amazing to witness the power of work on the human spirit."

According to Hardesty, businesses can also reap the benefits of working with Goodwill on discovering talent. "Firstly, any business seeking out potential employees through Goodwill can rest assured they are getting pre-screened candidates matched to their needs. We also offer free job postings and job fairs, organized and facilitated on site at Goodwill."

Goodwill also hosted a Summer Youth Employment Program, which was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act through the Workforce Investment Act. These training programs



## Ora's Story

Ora Mickler Harris was named by Goodwill Industries as the Ralph Walker Graduate of the Year. Seeing her now, leading an established and happy life with her husband and working in steady employment, you would never believe the life hurdles she's overcome to find success.

Ora came to Goodwill at the bleakest point in her life. Her mother had previously died and, in response, she turned to drugs. She spent a year at Shepherd's Gate, a women's shelter, and had no transportation, no money and nothing to her name. Ora says at that time, it was "just God and me."

But when Ora found Goodwill, she discovered a life blessing that would totally redirect her path. At Goodwill, she received job training and steady income and was eventually hired as a full-time employee at the corporate

office/distribution location on Haywood Road. With no transportation, Ora's commitment and drive to succeed was never more apparent than as each day she walked one mile to the bus stop and then from Haywood Mall to Goodwill. Throughout it all, she was never late to work one day.

Through the opportunities afforded to her at Goodwill, Ora rejoined the community, met her husband and proved to be a shining example of the power of work. Coworkers remember that Ora never said "no" or "I can't" – instead she took everything on with a smile and an attitude of perseverance.

What started out as a second chance ended up saving Ora's life, and now her dreams for the future know no bounds. "The best is yet to come," she says. "God is not done yet."



Goodwill clients learn skills necessary to help them compete in the Greenville workforce.

prepared 75 youths age 18-24 for success with work readiness skills and hands-on experience in food service and computer de-manufacturing.

The Goodwill Foundation of the Upstate/Midlands was founded in 2004 to assist in the expansion of Goodwill's mission to help persons with special needs and disabilities become independent and economically self-sufficient citizens via education, training courses and job placement. Popular Upstate charity events "The Big Dig" and "The Mud Run" contribute substantial funding to the Foundation to further the mission.

"Donations are extremely important to fulfilling Goodwill's mission, and we have been lucky to have a supportive community that donates millions of goods and items that can be recycled or sold in our retail outlets to fund our programs and services," says Hardesty. "We are proud to say that 92 cents out of every dollar goes directly into the support of our programs. We truly are turning donations into jobs."

The charitable donations of the community along with the willingness of Upstate businesses to extend employment opportunities are helping to make a difference in the lives of individuals struggling to find their place in the world.

Jeffrey Gee is just one example of a life changed for the better. He was able to find employment through Piedmont Skills, a service of the Greenville County Disabilities and Special Needs Board. The board offers a variety of programs designed to help disabled people gain skills and secure employment. Sheltered workshops allow vocational training in varied settings while clients can earn incentive wages for performance. Enclaves or mobile work crews allow individuals to be transported to business sites throughout the county to work. The supported employment service assists qualified clients in obtaining training and support for career search.

Gee now works about six hours a day, going out with an enclave to two Upstate businesses. He provides janitorial services for one company while counting, sorting and weighing plastic cutlery for another manufacturer. His mom credits Piedmont Skills and his employment with bringing a sense of joy and achievement to Jeffrey's life. "The opportunity to work and pay his own way has given Jeffrey a new lease on life," says Gee. "He has gained independence and a greater sense of self. **GBM**

