

PEF Communicator

March 2012



ON THE JOB — Jeremiah Beauvilet works on etching lenses under the direction of PEF member John Raw in the Optics Department at Wallkill Correctional Facility, while Keston Keane (below) measures the frame for a pair of eyeglasses.

A new vision!

Story and photos by DEBORAH A. MILES

Ten years ago, Keston Keane and Jeremiah Beauvilet were running the streets, hanging with the wrong people and making bad decisions. Their actions landed both of them in prison. In their wildest dreams, they never imagined themselves working in an optics department, making eyeglasses for people throughout the state.

Today, these two young men are doing exactly that. They are not only helping others with vision problems, they are seeing life through a new set of lenses themselves.

This transformation of sorts has happened at the Wallkill Correctional Facility in Ulster County under the direction of a few devoted men, including PEF member John Raw.

Raw, who supervises the training and laboratory production in the optics department, said 350-400 pairs of glasses are shipped out each day. Wallkill

produces them for all the inmates in the state, and for most Medicaid recipients in New York.

“The inmates interested in the program start out with a basic math test.

It’s geared to see if they are paying attention, and you don’t have to know optics to pass the test,” Raw said. “It does show me if they have a desire to learn, or a sort of acumen for math. I get into formulas and different optical concepts in the class, so I want to make sure the person coming in can absorb what I am teaching.”



The optics department employs 95 to 110 inmates who earn a starting salary of 26 cents per hour. It gradually increases to 42 cents, and the highest an inmate can earn in this program is 65 cents per hour. Some work in shipping and receiving, others enter data, while most learn the craft of making lenses. They work seven hours a day, except for those who are highly motivated and can work a few extra hours.

“The inmates like to spend time here, rather than going back to their cells,” Raw said. “I like to push them. I stress them out sometimes. It’s good for them, because it makes them work and it makes them think about what they are doing. If they are not challenged, they are just doing a routine job.

“The teaching never stops. We begin with the basics and then we get into the technicalities of making lenses. We work with the guys continuously to help them make the different glasses. There are varying degrees of difficulty,” he said.

The result of their work speaks volumes. Of the 350-400 pairs of glasses produced each day, only two or three are returned.

“Mostly, it’s a minor thing such as the wrong frame color. It’s not usually a

lens problem.

“Some of these guys are very good at what they do. Some of them have gotten jobs in the field upon being released and have worked their way up to managerial positions. It’s not like they are going to an entry-level position. They have the potential to earn a very good living,” Raw said.

A few of the men who were released and went on to get good jobs have returned to visit the optics department.

“They talk to the inmates and tell them the opportunity is here. It gives the guys who are here inspiration to work harder,” Raw said.

The purpose of the program isn’t only to train the inmates for a potential career, but to help build character.

Keane and Beauvilet both described it as “beautiful.”

“This has opened my eyes to a new world. It has given me an opportunity, not only for a career but a new life. It has made me more compassionate to the plight of the blind and people with vision problems. Now I have a purpose. I’ve been incarcerated going on 10 years. Of all the programs I’ve been in, this one has no limits. When they see you go above and beyond, they help you to learn further. It’s not a rinky-dinky program. It’s what you make it,” Keane said.

“Mr. Raw is an excellent teacher,” Beauvilet added. “He knows the craft. He’s stern, but I look up to him as a father figure. He helps us become better people, as well as better employees.

Debbie Miles
PEF Reporter/Writer