



Removing Barriers

Lexington's Opportunity for Work and Learning Makes Jobs Attainable

By Robyn Roenker

When Julius Johnson was first referred to Lexington's Opportunity for Work and Learning (OWL) in May 2009 for assistance finding employment, he was down on his luck and low on self-confidence. His former drug abuse and felony sentence haunted him: If he was forthcoming about his past on job applications, he never got a call back. When he failed to report his conviction and new employers found out, he was quickly fired.

He came to OWL seeking a better life and a chance to regain custody of his young son.

He began working in OWL's Lexington Manufacturing Center and within a few months was promoted to quality technician, in charge of evaluating others' work.

"They pushed me as far as leadership," said Johnson, 33, a Lafayette High School graduate. "I was the guy who had to look for mistakes. I had a very key role in production meetings. I had a voice when I was there. OWL kind of helped bring that out in me. They saw potential in me that nobody else had seen, and that felt really good."

Johnson also enrolled in OWL's computer courses, a move that he credits for changing his life.

Although he began at OWL with almost no computer background, now "my whole life is built around computers," said Johnson, who will earn an associate's degree in human services management from the University of Phoenix in



JOSEPH REY AU PHOTOS

Manufacturing manager Johnetta Jackson's 38 years of experience with OWL help workers such as Abigail Hardez, right.

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March. He plans to continue his studies with the online university in hopes of earning bachelor's and master's degrees in social work.

After working at OWL for 16 months, Johnson was hired by the Urban League of Lexington, where he now works as a core member leading computer classes at various downtown venues for the homeless, low-income individuals, and those just out of prison.

"I've learned I can help a lot of people out," he said. "They see me as someone who's gone through what they've gone through. So I connect with a lot of people. This is the most rewarding job I've ever had."

A 50-Year Vision

Lexington's Opportunity for Work and Learning began in 1961 as Opportunity Workshop of Lexington. While the agency's name changed in 2000, its acronym and its mission — helping individuals overcome barriers to employment through job and life skills training

— have remained the same for 50 years.

Foundations for the agency began in 1959 when a group of concerned parents approached the Junior League of Lexington for assistance starting a program to help their disabled adult children lead more independent lives. The Junior League donated \$30,000 to start the agency, and by 1961 OWL had become a reality.

Over its 50-year tenure roughly 18,000 participants have utilized some aspect of OWL's services, said Becky Cabe, director of the OWL Center, a portion of OWL that facilitates the agency's vocational evaluations, life skills classes, employment counseling, and job placement assistance. Last year alone OWL served 397 participants, and OWL graduates found jobs in a range of fields, from entry-level food service and hotel work with employers such as Comfort Inn to forklift operator duties at Webasto. In 2010, OWL participants secured starting salaries ranging from minimum wage to \$61,000.

Those who come to OWL are diverse.

Last year, participants ranged in age from 16 to 64. Some had only an elementary education; others had masters' degrees. All have a significant employment barrier or a combination of barriers — such as a physical, mental, or cognitive disability. Many also face other barriers, including substance or drug abuse, poverty, or past criminal convictions. Some have suffered a sudden debilitating injury and need assistance seeking a new, less physically demanding career. Others have been out of work so long, they're on the verge of homelessness.

For participants struggling financially OWL serves as a liaison to community nonprofits that can assist with providing food, transportation, and other basic necessities. For those struggling with life skills issues, OWL offers training in building self-esteem, coping with anger, time and money management, and more.

Nearly all participants are referred to the agency by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, or OVR. (Participants cannot typically self-refer, as OWL receives no state or federal subsidies but is supported through various grants and a "placement fee" from OVR each time one of its referred participants finds and maintains a job for 90 days.)

The agency's countless success stories are inspiring and speak to the diversity of its participants.

"It's so rewarding to see individuals that come here for a program, career-wise, but even more than that are just down on life. The self-esteem you see built through our program is simply amazing," said David Boggs, OWL's president and CEO, who took lead of the agency four and a half years ago. "It's so exciting to see people go out and get that job, and they



Cheryl Stewart learns computer skills from Paris Sims III.

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OWL president David Boggs: "It's so exciting to see people go out and get that job."

say, 'Look where I was, and look where I am now.' "

Michele Lunsford came to OWL to seek one-on-one employment counseling and job placement assistance after a degenerative hearing disability ultimately forced her to give up her career as an elementary school teacher. "My hearing aids at the time weren't able to help me differentiate between primary and background noise, and I decided to quit when I could no longer give 100 percent to the classroom," she said. With help from OWL employment consultant Joetta Johnson — who, Lunsford said, made a point of truly getting to know her and what she wanted and needed in a new career path — Lunsford found a job working as an accounts manager at Mayfair Village retirement community.

OWL's employment consultants work with participants to locate job matches through online job postings and classified newspaper advertisements.

"OWL is so wonderful about finding the strengths of each particular indi-

vidual," Lunsford said. "Thanks to them, I have a job again that I really love."

Former OWL participant Shawn Smith admits he lacked the basic skills to get and keep a job when he first came to OWL, but thanks to his training at the manufacturing center and his completion of a forklift/machine operating class there, he now has a steady job at Kaba Mas as a forklift operator.

"OWL taught me about responsibilities, how to be on time, how to play by the rules, and how to be disciplined on the job," Smith said. "And they taught me how to present myself to employers, how to create a resume, and how to apply for a job."

Although Smith's former criminal conviction had been a barrier to getting hired before, thanks to his training at OWL, this time around at Kaba Mas, he said, his "experience outweighed my felony background" giving him a shot at a new career. "That's a big thing," Smith said. "When you learn skills and get certified like I did, then you've got progress. Then, nothing

can stop you from getting a job."

Lexington Manufacturing Center

Today, OWL's administrative offices and its Lexington Manufacturing Center (LMC) operate across a 74,000-square-foot sprawling campus that encompasses three large operating plants, with one additional forthcoming, all along Kennedy Road, off Lexington's Newtown Pike.

(OWL also operates an off-campus office called Skill Enhancement and Employment Center, or SEEC, begun in 1991. It focuses on providing cognitive and vocational evaluations and job placement training and assistance to adolescents and adults with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, or other emotional or neurological disorders. The SEEC office is located downtown, at West Jefferson Place.)

About 55 percent of OWL participants opt to take part in a 15-week training as a temporary employee in its LMC. If a participant has not secured permanent employment at the end of 15 weeks, he or she can stay on for eight more. After that, the person can discontinue services or opt to work out of OWL's temporary staffing agency, Commonwealth Staffing Services, explained Boggs.

For those who've been out of work for a while, the chance to hold down a steady job at LMC offers an immediate resume boost and, for many — like Julius Johnson and Shawn Smith — a much-needed self-esteem boost to boot.

Inside the tidy, fastidiously organized production lines in one of LMC's three manufacturing plants, employees work on an array of jobs — from assembling mounting brackets for car sun roofs and internal mechanisms for electrical breaker boxes to installation kits for air-conditioning units. Signs everywhere remind employees to check their work, with detailed photographs for how each

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item is to be properly assembled.

OWL's LMC offers a decisively structured atmosphere, helping establish and reinforce what Boggs calls "job hardening" or "job conditioning" skills for its employees. Workers aren't allowed to chat

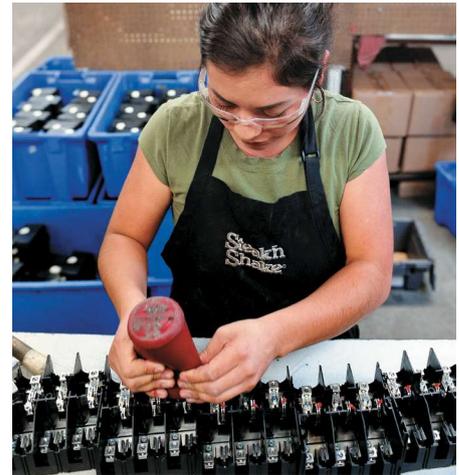
with one another on the job. They're paid based on the quality of their output, and achieve raises as their production levels meet expectations. At any given time LMC is staffed by 45 supervisors and permanent employees — many of whom are former OWL participants — and 75-100 current OWL trainees.

LMC currently has job contracts with 26 companies, both local and nationally based, which it wins through competitive bids against both for-profit and non-profit companies alike. Its product quality rating is 99.95 percent — thanks largely to the stringent testing and checking that's performed on output for every job project daily.

"Our companies can't afford to have a line shut down because of a quality issue," said Boggs. "Everybody here inspects their own work."

LMC's largest contracts include work for LexMark, Snyder Electric (formerly Square D), Trane, and Pilkington Glass. Since 2000, LMC employees also have worked on a contract basis with Keeneland to help tag and price merchandise items for the Keeneland Gift Shop.

"To be honest, we're probably more structured than a normal job site would be," said Johnetta Jackson, LMC's manufacturing manager, who has been with OWL for 38 years. "Some of our people coming in haven't worked in a long time. We emphasize skills they're going to need to get and keep a job: being at work on



Annay Hernandez makes parts for Snyder Electric, a local OWL contract.

time, quality control, efficiency. All those things are evaluated with participants' employment consultants weekly to determine the progress they're making."

While Boggs may wear the mantle of OWL president and CEO, he jokes that it's really Sally Lynam, a 41-year-veteran of the OWL LMC assembly line, who runs the place. Many current and former OWL participants, who cite Lynam's determination and optimistic spirit as their inspiration, tend to agree.

Lynam, who is wheelchair bound, never wanted to let that get in the way of living an independent, productive life. Working at OWL all these year, she said, has given her that.

"Working here has given me my own life," Lynam said. "I don't like to be dependent on anyone." 🦿

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