

Seattle's Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., describes exciting expansion

Independence, opportunity, achievement and self-sufficiency are important concepts that emit from Seattle, Washington's Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc. Now, those ideas are about to reach all the way to Spokane, Washington when a new 52,000-square-foot Lighthouse facility opens this summer.

The mission of the nonprofit is no-nonsense: to create and enhance opportunities for independence and self-sufficiency of people who are blind, Deaf-Blind, and blind with other disabilities.

The Spokane location will begin operating with five employees who are blind. The target goal in three years time, however, is to have 40 full-time employees who are blind at the new facility.

If that accomplishment sounds ambitious, then the history of Lighthouse is background that may help put the possibilities in perspective. It is an organization that has been serving the Seattle community since 1918.

The emphasis is on empowering employees to realize what they can achieve with their particular set of capabilities. Kirk Adams is an example of one such success story. In January, he became the first Lighthouse president and CEO who is blind since the nonprofit was established 90 years ago.

As far as Adams is concerned, people who are blind can manage just about any feat other than driving a vehicle.

At the Seattle Lighthouse manufacturing plant, employees have the means to perform their jobs and to feel the fulfillment of doing a job well. Their Website reports,

"Supports include an in-house sign language interpreting department to ensure effective communication for Deaf-Blind employees, staff mobility instructors to teach



Keri Brent

By Bethany Broadwell

independent travel with a white cane or dog guide, and over 100 computer workstations adapted for use by visually impaired individuals."

Keri Brent, 33, is a Lighthouse employee who can attest to how these workplace accommodations are essential for her daily routine.

When she was 13 years old, Brent learned that she had retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic eye condition that leads to progressive vision loss. By the time she was 27, she was blind, with only the ability to see shadows.

Born and raised in Rhode Island, Brent moved to Washington five years ago.

"When I first arrived in Seattle, I faced hours of employment research," she said. Her first job was a part-time position as a cashier at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. Eventually, however, Brent decided she wanted full-time work.



Kirk Adams

She found the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind by researching organizations on the Web that help individuals with low vision. At the time, the organization was offering customer service classes. After Brent carried the classes for a year, she accepted a part-time position as a customer service representative. Once she had that experience, Brent applied for a position as an administrative assistant for Lighthouse's development department. She has recently been promoted to development assistant.

When Brent arrives at work in the morning, her first task is checking her e-mails for tour requests. "There are a lot of requests for tours from the public wanting to see our facility and see firsthand how we make jobs accessible for blind and Deaf-Blind individuals," she explained. Not only does Brent schedule in-house employees to be available for tours, but she also assists with leading the tours.

Another responsibility Brent handles is managing the Lighthouse database, ensuring that all information received from the community is processed correctly. She has a scanner on her desk that reads all printed information into a Word document which she can then listen to through speech software called JAWS (Job Access with Speech). It is these kinds of tools that further enable Brent to help with donor cultivation and other clerical duties as needed.

"I am very fortunate to have this assistive technology because without it I wouldn't be able to do my job successfully," Brent said.

Her goals for the future at the Seattle Lighthouse are to spend many successful years learning, growing and fulfilling "our wonderful mission in every way possible."

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At the new Spokane Lighthouse facility, employees will manufacture the Skilcraft Quartet line of wall boards. They will also make hanging file folders, binders as well as assemble a new entrenching tool line. For their convenience, the workers will have easy access to major bus lines and other public transportation. The plant is also located near retail shops and affordable housing.

Employees will typically be hired and then trained over a 120-day period. Lighthouse staff will provide comprehensive training and supports for employees who are blind.

The focus will be on hiring new employees in the Spokane area to work. Kirk Adams wrote in a letter documenting the steady progress of the new Lighthouse location: "We've already begun the recruitment process through the Washington State Department of Services for the Blind (DSB) Spokane office, and they are helping us to identify qualified applicants." *

Resources:

Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

www.seattlighthouse.org
2501 South Plum Street or PO Box 14959
Seattle, WA 98114
Voice: (206) 322-4200 or (800) 914-7307
TTY: (206) 324-1388
Fax: (206) 329-3397

Online Overview of JAWS

http://www.freedomscientific.com/fs_products/software_jaws.asp

Spokane Office

Sherwood Building
510 W. Riverside, Room 209
Spokane, WA 99201
Phone: (509) 456-4458
Fax: (509) 625-5239

National Federation of the Blind

www.nfb.org
1800 Johnson Street
Baltimore, MD 21230
Phone: (410) 659-9314
Fax: (410) 685-5653
E-mail: pmaurer@nfb.org

Washington State Department of Services for the Blind

www.dsb.wa.gov
Toll-free: 1-800-552-7103
TTY: (206) 721-4056
E-mail: information@dsb.wa.gov

