



## **REENTRY ROUNDTABLE**

*Reentry Roundtable* is a continuing column that provides news, facts, and program successes within the prisoner reentry program.

### **MSI Offers New Path for Ex-Offenders**

Michigan State industries (MSI) Optical Plant Manager Matt Yeager, and Optical Theory Instructor Gerald Johnson arrive for work each day with a mission and purpose in mind. Matt is tasked with providing a high-quality product and service to his customers, and along with Gerald, they have a responsibility to turn offenders into productive members of their community upon release by teaching them a skill or trade. For some, it will be their first experience in the working world. Imagine the feeling of accomplishment when they received the following email:

*“Hello, my name is Jon, and I was a former student in the Optical Theory class while serving over 15 yrs. at Southern Michigan Correctional Facility. I worked in the MSI Optical Lab on and off eight of those years. Through all of my training and hard work, I learned the skills necessary to obtain a job with an established optical lab in South Bend, Indiana. Working in the MSI Optical Lab was a good learning experience for me, and I know that I will move up the scale because of my knowledge of the equipment. I hope that more prisoners are given the same opportunity to learn a vocational trade, and allow them a fresh start upon release.”*



**L to R:** Optical Theory Instructor Gerald Johnson, Ex-Offender Jon and MSI Optical Plant Manager Matt Yeager.

Jon’s dream of successful reentry came true when he gained employment with the South Bend, Indiana lab within 45 days of paroling to Indiana via Interstate Compact supervision in May 2010. Jon said, “I was honest with my em-

*ployer and they hired me based on my skills and experience.”* He hired in at the lab as an Assistant Lab Technician, but soon landed the Lead Lab Technician position. While incarcerated, he attended optical theory class in the morning and worked in the lab afternoons. Through years of in-class and hands-on training, he acquired the technical and mechanical skills necessary to run a fast-paced optical lab. There was not one machine in the MSI Optical Lab that he had not mastered. A short list of his skills includes: computer data entry, lens surfacing and finishing, and use of generators, polishers, digital lensometers, wax blockers and edger machines. Jon also learned soft skills such as having a strong work ethic, positive attitude, time management, respect for others, cleanliness and communication.

*“Communication was my biggest problem, along with anger issues,”* Jon said. Matt Yeager recalled those issues very well, but stated, “Jon turned out to be the best student and worker in my class.”

Jon is on the path to success! Motivation to succeed kept him focused on his goal even when turned away due to his prior felony. A door opened, and tenacity along with preparedness ultimately paid off.

The South Bend lab manager Julie stated of Jon, “He is wonderful and one of the best employees that I have ever had. I had to

*trust that he was truthful and I wanted to give him a chance. You don’t see a lot of people that can come right into the optical field with*

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*many years of experience. He came right in and picked up very quickly. It's been over a year, and he continues to prove himself daily. He is very fast and efficient. Hiring Jon was an asset to our operation, and he has a very bright future here."*

Ex-offenders Martha and Sharon were both formerly employed at the MSI Dental Lab for over 15 years. They are two of over a dozen inmates who landed jobs in the lab where they made over 2,000 sets of dentures for fellow prisoners. A job in the MSI dental lab has a starting pay of 95 cents per hour for an entry level position, and tops off at \$1.25 an hour for an experienced lead technician. A new path and new life has begun for both women after being paroled from MDOC in recent months. Sharon paroled in September 2011 and Martha in January 2012. The technical training they both received in the lab may put them in line for dental lab jobs that pay about \$11.00 an hour to start and up to \$25.00 an hour for an experienced technician. Rockey Burris, Plant Manager, MSI Dental Lab, was elated to pass along updates on both ex-offenders. Burris was contacted by both women who wanted to thank him for allowing them to be a part of the industries program. Prison Industries offers those who have taken wrong turns in life a "second chance." A strong work ethic is ingrained in the culture. The MSI program serves as a catalyst, providing technical training and meaningful work experience. It teaches the value of earning a paycheck, instills a solid work ethic, fosters a sense of self-worth, and promotes mutual respect among inmate workers and MSI supervisors – traits which prospective employers seek outside prison walls.

Martha posted a resume on-line the morning of January 19, 2012. By 4:00 p.m. the same day,

Martha had received 25 job offers! An established dental company contacted her to grant an interview over the phone. After the interview was completed, she was offered the job the same day. Martha was overcome with joy, and after realizing there would be a 3 hour commute to and from work she let out a big sigh. She did not have adequate transportation at the moment. To her surprise, the company returned the call and informed her about plans to open a new lab. The icing on the cake, Martha was offered the lead lab technician position at the new location. The company felt she was not only the right person to open the new lab, but the most qualified.



**L to R:** Ex-Offender Martha and MSI Dental Lab Plant Manager Rockey Burris.

The company included a generous offer of paid lodging, food and fuel allowance for Martha's relocation efforts. Martha finished her first week on the job 1/20/12. The employer is very satisfied with her work and technical knowledge. They are also willing to accept any parolee from the MSI program if they are as

qualified as Martha.

Sharon landed two jobs within two weeks. Both were part-time at the beginning and then one became a full-time opportunity. She is now employed as a dental technician in Southfield, MI. The prospect of searching for meaningful work upon release from prison after years of incarceration can be overwhelming, but with dedication and hard work, both women now have promising futures.

*This article was written and submitted by Michigan State Industries Marketing Specialist Tujauna White.*

