

MANAGER'S MOTIVATION AT MICHIGAN STATE INDUSTRIES

Want to find out what motivates the shop managers who keep Michigan State Industries (MSI) running? See these two stories and find out that for MSI managers, the job could lead to a future in writing or provide the gift of sight to the less fortunate.

Matt Yeager, Optical Shop Manager



Matt Yeager, far left

The phrase “it takes a community” certainly applies to every aspect in my goal to provide incarcerated individuals with opportunities to learn real world applications and optical theory instruction. My goal each day when I arrive at work is to try and make a difference in a worker’s life from helping them learn the optical trade to obtaining meaningful employment to collaborating with outside community programs to provide less fortunate kids locally and overseas with eye care and eyewear to countries and portions of the world that would otherwise receive no care at all. It warms my heart with gratitude when I think about the reentry success of a formerly incarcerated individual who now runs his own optical lab or to see images of children overseas wearing glasses donated through our program’s great partnerships.

I focus on the valuable hard skills necessary for outside employment in the field of optometry in processing and filling optical prescriptions. Many of the skills workers receive will ready them for future employment in the optical field after reentry such as lens surfacing, finishing, polishing, edging, and working with the latest cutting-edgetechnologyandequipmentssuchasdigital len

someters, wax blockers, generators, and edger machines to name a few. Although hard skills are important, “soft” skills are by no means overlooked, and I strive to instill these daily as a work ritual... showing the importance of having a strong work ethic, positive attitude, time management, respect for yourself and others, cleanliness, and communication.

My commitment to changing the lives of incarcerated individuals is unwavering and can be measured by the success stories shared by former parolees over the years and recent parolees alike who continue to reach out to me with updates on their success. On a recent project helmed by members of the First United Methodist Church of Adrian, MI., eyeglasses were shipped to Liberia, a country in West Africa, which borders the Atlantic. Key participants in the project were incarcerated individuals at the MSI Optical Lab who are involved in the cleaning, sorting, repair and packaging of slightly damaged glasses. Additional community assistance in the project came from the Adrian Breakfast Lions Club, which was responsible for bringing in a number of additional donated glasses; Tecumseh Packaging Solutions, which provided preformed shipping boxes to neatly pack and hold each individual pair of glasses; and Postal Plus of Adrian, which



Above: Former MSI Optical Lab worker now owns his own optical shop.

was responsible for getting the many boxes of glasses from Adrian to their destination. A Methodist Church in North Carolina with ties of its own to Liberia offered to ship the glasses from Adrian to Liberia at no charge. The same church in North Carolina sent along 1,500 eyeglasses of its own, bringing the total shipment of glasses to 3,000. It is the satisfaction in knowing that our program touches the lives of others each day and puts these guys on a path to success.

Will Rondeau, License Plate Manager



Above: Will Rondeau, (left) and a formerly incarcerated individual meet post-release.

Even today I ask myself at times what was I thinking 34 years ago when I chose a career in Corrections. After all, everything you see on TV shows you how dangerous and unfulfilling of a job it must be. Well, it has turned out to be just the opposite. In fact, I am not sure another career choice would have been so satisfying and rewarding as this one has ended up being.

I was a journalism major in college looking for a career where I could write books on how I could save the world or how I could help people make lots of money. I even thought about maybe writing murder for hire fiction novels that would keep my readers on edge until the very end. So, when my friends ask me today why I am still working for Corrections, this is what I tell them.

I have been working for Michigan State Industries (MSI) since 1994 and every day I go through 13 different gates

and doors just to get to my office. Things have not changed much with the building I work in, but it sure has changed a lot with the job itself. I learned a long time ago, that the only way you will be successful in any business, is to take ownership of that business even if you do not own it. I also learned not to burn any bridges because you inevitably may need to cross that bridge again sometime down the road. These are things that you eventually learn at most jobs. Correctional Industries goes much further than that.

I sit back in my chair at work and think how many other jobs allow you to meet so many different people from all different backgrounds. How many jobs do you call most of your co-workers only by their last name? How many jobs would you walk into the door and have someone make you empty your pockets and go through your personal items and be ok with it? I could go on and on, but the bottom line is that we all have learned or been trained to enter this other world and at the end of your day try and leave it behind. Good luck with that! The strange thing is that even though there have been many times I wish I could have done this, there are many more times I am glad I could not. I have so many stories to tell and so many friends that I have met that maybe when I finally close that last prison door on my way out, that I will sit down and write that nonfiction novel and entitle it: "The World Left Behind but Never Forgotten."

Each of the more than 8.8 million registered vehicles in Michigan must include a plate made at the MSI License Plate factory, which cranks out about 12,000 license plates per day, an estimated 1.5 million plates per year. Employment at the factory is a coveted job for incarcerated individuals, who gain work experience and learn valuable soft skills. I am also proud of my production team, who have been instrumental in the successful reentry to job placement for many of our incarcerated workers.

We employ incarcerated individuals that learn a profession here that hopefully they will take out to the world with them, which means they will get a good job and not come back to prison. That's one of our major goals here... to teach these guys a skill. •