

# FINDING THE PERFECT FIT



**A willingness to challenge the status quo opens the door to opportunities.**

BY ANDY BROWNSTEIN

In 2015, after 17 years at the helm of a publicly traded international aviation company, Hugh McElroy decided it was time to retire. But settling down, it turns out, wasn't in his nature.

"That lasted about 3 months," he said. "I just realized I can't retire, ever. I'll go crazy."

McElroy brought that sense of restlessness, and experience in leadership at a number of nonprofits, to his current position as CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.

Established in 1931, the Dallas Lighthouse serves a massive North Texas territory just slightly larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. The organization employs 267 people, mostly in textiles and manufacturing.

The territory, much of it former cattle and horse country, is seeing a huge growth spurt, with an influx of 1,500 new families per month. That fact – and

the general unpredictability of federal contracting – led McElroy to seek out new opportunities for the Lighthouse in the private sector. The textile industry, which brings in \$3-\$4 trillion annually worldwide, seemed like a natural fit.

That's when the magic happened.

"It's interesting how, when you leave yourself open, things will present themselves to you," McElroy said. "The status quo is the safer place to be. You don't have to deal with change. But if you do keep yourself open, and you look at the whole spectrum of availability, you surprise yourself. The opportunities have just continued to flow for us."

Earlier this year, the organization partnered with Two Blind Brothers, a New York City startup that is the brainchild of Bryan and Bradford Manning. Both men are in their twenties and were born with Stargardt's disease,

which causes deterioration of central vision. They left top-flight careers in Manhattan finance to launch the company, which devotes 100 percent of profits to finding a cure for blindness.

The Mannings spent close to a year selecting fabrics, focusing on the tactile feel and quality, before settling on a line of supersoft casual shirts. After they were featured on The Ellen DeGeneres Show in January, things really took off for the company, which now manufactures thousands of shirts a year – all at the Dallas Lighthouse.

Each shirt carries a braille tag with a word like "feel," "brother," or "vision." That last word is central to the Manning's message: Lack of eyesight does not mean lack of vision. Profits from the business currently support more than 20 clinical trials.

"Working with the Lighthouse is incredible for us," said Bryan Manning.



▲ Bryan Manning (left) and Hugh McElroy discuss production on the manufacturing floor at Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.



▲ Jessie Phuong Tran sews a Two Blind Brothers shirt at the Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.

“On the research front, we can now donate money to curing these diseases, and at the same time, help a community we love so much to improve their quality of life and have incredible jobs. And the quality of our shirts has never been higher. The people at Dallas Lighthouse do just perfect work.”

Approximately 10 employees work on the shirts. Each sewing machine is customized to the individual employee. Finger guards surround the sewing needles, and strips of packing tape serve as a guide to make straight lines. The machines are outfitted with adjustable lamps that use LED or fluorescent lights, depending on the employee’s visual capacity. Those who don’t wear glasses must wear a clear plastic shield that swings down to protect the eyes in case a needle breaks.

Sewers can feel their place with pegs that are put on the fabric. Lighthouse employees tend to work assembly-line style, sewing the same section of multiple garments.

Blind from birth, Elaina Beth Tillinghas came to the Lighthouse eight years ago. Wearing high-magnification glasses that she compares to a telescope, Tillinghas uses guards and guides to keep her fingers where they should be. She enjoys the challenge. “I like it when I can hold up a piece, and it looks nice, and the inspector says it passes,” she said. “I can say, ‘I did that.’ ”

The expansion of the Two Blind Brothers business, as well as other newly added commercial contracts, is part of an overall growth agenda for the Dallas Lighthouse. In 2015, when McElroy started, the facility employed 104 people. It now has 267 employees and is ahead of schedule to hit its target of 575 employees by 2020.

Recent revisions to its strategic plan have led the Dallas Lighthouse to



▲ Brothers Bryan and Bradford Manning moved production of their clothing line to Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind to keep up with growing demand.



▲ Reginald Howard (left), Gerber Cutter operator, with Bryan Manning of Two Blind Brothers, in the Textile Manufacturing Center at the Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.

increase its focus on technology in both careers and services. The agency is working to expand assistive technology training aimed at increasing career opportunities in high-demand, upwardly mobile fields within as well as beyond the Lighthouse.

The agency recently purchased a call center and marketing company, where approximately half of the 40-plus employees are people who are blind. Operators there seamlessly handle calls using multiple forms of assistive technology that utilize sound and touch rather than sight. McElroy said another acquisition to be integrated with the call center will be geared toward people who

are blind who are interested in careers in inbound and outbound tech support.

“Some people are going to say, ‘How in the blazes are people who are blind going to do that?’ ” McElroy said. “Around here, we truly believe where there’s a will, there’s a way. We don’t waste time talking about the realm of the impossible.”

McElroy’s confidence is well placed. After a stroll through the textile manufacturing floor, where brightly-colored fabric lines rows of sewing operators lost in their work, nothing seems impossible. □

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