

Dallas-Fort Worth

Clothing production expands at Lighthouse

When Tish Cox told her daughter she was thinking of producing her fashion line at Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind, the teenager responded, "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

The idea of blind and partially sighted people sewing \$350 blouses and \$795 dresses does beggar belief. But it's been working — successfully — since August.

"It's the coolest thing ever," enthused Cox during a tour of her 4,500-square-foot production space at the Lighthouse complex near Cityplace. "The goal is for Lighthouse to grow and us to grow."

Cox, who has been in business since 2010 and includes Canary among her retail accounts, previously used contract manufacturers but was concerned her company needs would exceed their output. Producing at Lighthouse allows her to keep production in the U.S. at about the same cost, she noted.

The 16 sewers, cutters and pressers producing her goods earn \$9 to \$20 an hour, and half are blind or visually impaired. The five-year plan aims for the staff to grow to 55 vision-impaired employees and 25 sighted.

Forrest "Rusty" Bell, who designed the sewing training program for the visually impaired but has since left Lighthouse, initially didn't think it could be done. After racking his brain, he taught by having

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students shadow his hands to feel how they moved.

"It's all about muscle memory and repetition," Bell said.

Sighted sewers watch the stabbing needle, but the vision impaired feel the fabric in order to guide it. Finger guards on the sewing machines prevent injury.

There have been mistakes, Cox conceded, but that happens in any garment factory. Sighted staff supervise production and inspect and measure every finished piece.

Dallas Lighthouse is no stranger to clothing manufacturing as it makes reflective uniforms and vests for the Texas Department of Transportation. Last year, it introduced DLB brand active wear for women, men and kids, as well as reflective and weatherproof togs for pets.

It began making embossed vinyl products for U.S. military services in the 1940s and also supplies plastic folders and eyeglass cases. It ships similar goods to the U.S. departments of Commerce and Energy.

More projects are in the works, noted Lighthouse president and CEO Hugh McElroy.

This month, it will an-



Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Elaina Tillinghast of Dallas draws a top closer so she can see the progress made on one of designer Tish Cox's fashions. "It's the coolest thing ever," Cox said of the garments' production at Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.

nounce its involvement with a miniature wearable medical device that helps regain some vision lost to macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa or diabetic myopathy, he said.

In February, Dallas Lighthouse plans to release DLB safety equipment featuring flame-retardant reflective clothing.

"By midyear, we plan to open a new low-vision center

with three comprehensive services labs for blind and low-vision people. Two types of vision labs have never existed in North Texas," he said.

The various initiatives are expected to yield 575 jobs over four years, McElroy said.

An estimated 2.3 percent of Americans have a visual disability, and the figure rises to 6.7 percent for seniors 65 and older, according to Cornell

University Employment and Disability Institute.

The Dallas Lighthouse serves 153,000 sight-impaired people in North Texas and has 231 full-time staffers, of whom 75 percent are visually impaired, McElroy said. The group also employs blind and vision-impaired business services personnel such as call center operators.

"The Dallas Lighthouse is

the largest employer of blind and vision-impaired workers in North Texas," McElroy pointed out. "It is the third-oldest organization of its kind in the U.S. entering its 86th year of operation."

He was recruited out of retirement in 2015 to lead the organization.

"This is the happiest place to work I've ever been," McElroy said.