

# Deaf Grads See Jobs Clearly NTID-trained workers are a good fit for Victor lens maker

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VICTOR- The noise of machines grinding prescription lenses all day long might be annoying for some people, but Andy Casile and many of his co-workers at LensCrafters in Eastview Mall don't mind it at all.

They don't hear it.

The store has a long history of hiring lab workers who are deaf or hard of hearing and who studied applied optical technology at National Technical Institute for the Deaf, a college of Rochester Institute of Technology. More than 100 students have graduated from the program since 1973.

"The school does a very good job in training them for the optical industry," said Jeff Braun, lab manager at the store.

Casile, 33, of Penfield, originally came to NTID to study computers but switched majors when he became fascinated watching others make lenses for glasses.

"It was cool," he said.

Traditionally, lens making was a solitary job, where a lot of communication with other people was not needed, said Braun.

But today, the lab behind the sales counter at LensCrafters is a busy place, with three or four workers at any time.

They pluck the appropriate lenses from various drawers, use machines to adjust frames, use other machines to cut, grind, coat and tint the lenses, and keep track of orders on computers.

Braun, who is hearing, has taken some sign language classes and communicates easily with most of his co-workers; many of them speak and are skilled lip-readers.

Dimitry Kiselgof, 31, of Henrietta works as assistant lab manager at the store. Like others in the lab, he dons a white lab coat and wears safety glasses.

"Deaf people like to work with their hands," said Kiselgof, a 1996 graduate of the NTID program. "And I like working with computers."

Laurie Matteson, 37, of Ontario, Wayne County, has worked in six LensCrafters stores in Ohio and New York in the past 17 years.

"I like to help other people to see better," she said.

Matteson, now an assistant lab manager, said she was the first deaf employee in many of the stores that she worked at, and didn't mind proving herself.

"They were not sure how a deaf person could do their job," Matteson said.

"I taught them deaf people can do it."

Braun said Matteson often steps out of the lab to wait on deaf customers on the sales floor.

Although other branches are closer to NTID, several deaf customers have gone out of their way to have their glasses made at the Eastview Mall store to patronize the place that hires so many deaf workers. NTID has about 1,200 deaf students.

The store also installed a text telephone and strobe lights in the lab, instead of a buzzer, to alert them when an order needs to be filled.

The partnership with NTID started more than 15 years ago, when LensCrafters accepted co-op students needing real life work experience in their field.

“There was a time when it was tough to find people” trained in the optics field, said store general manger Joe Tersigni, who is hearing.

Since then, several NTID grads have had full-time jobs at his store and others. Although the store doesn’t specifically target deaf employees, many have been referred by Matteson and others over the years.

“If we have an opening, we just try to find the best person to fill it,” Braun said. “We try to hire people who have good communication skills and fit in this environment.”

Braun said there has been little turnover in staff at his store in the past three years, which is pretty unusual in the industry. And the experienced staff has meant they are more efficient, with fewer broken lenses, which is common while they are being made to fit.

Diane Heyden, an instructor in the optics program at NTID, said five or six students graduate from the program each year and usually have no trouble finding a job in retail or wholesale labs or with ophthalmologists.

Companies still contact her asking if her graduating students can fill their employee needs.

“There does seem to be a pretty sizable demand out there,” Heyden said.

“Even though the economy has seen this slump, the optical industry seems to have kept busy. They’re still hiring.”

--Greg Livadas