



IFB Solutions employees JoAnn Dean (left), and Denesha Scales (right) holding a Fuel Handler's Suit

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR UNIQUE CHALLENGES

IFB Solutions' mission is to create more jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired – and, to that end, it must constantly innovate and adapt, transforming roles traditionally held by sighted individuals into jobs that are accessible to people with visual impairments.

But converting sighted jobs to work for blind employees is no easy task: There's no one-size-fits-all solution, as visual impairments affect people in many different ways. So, much of the innovation is up to trainers like JoAnn Dean, who has spent the last 20 years at IFB coming up with creative solutions to meet each individual's unique needs.

"It all depends on the person," JoAnn explained. "It's always a learning experience for me too. **We get to know each person, figure out what they need, what they struggle with, what their strengths are – and then we help them until they are successful.**"

Sometimes, that entails adding guides to the machine tailored to each individual: "A lot of times, what we're using is different colored tapes – black tape, red tape, yellow tape – because some people

can see light or bright colors better and others can see dark, contrasting colors better," she said. Other times, it's the sewing machine itself that needs a creative touch: "Some of them are a shiny silver color, which can be difficult for a lot of people, so we cover those with black or mark certain places on the machine with a color that they can see."

While IFB and its employees manufacture a diverse array of goods that serve both the commercial and military sectors, JoAnn's current focus is training a new wave of employees in Winston-Salem to manufacture the flame-resistant Fuel Handler's Suit, worn by the U.S. Army.

This specialized two-piece garment, currently produced by nearly 100 IFB employees in its Asheville

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Letter from the Editor

In this latest edition of the Impact newsletter, discover how the support of individuals like you enables IFB Solutions to empower people who are blind or visually impaired.

This month, which happens to be Low Vision Awareness Month, take a few minutes to read about the assistive devices that enable our employees to sew quality garments for the U.S. military – or learn about the creative solutions our trainers use to help employees who are blind create their own success. Then, get to know our Philanthropy team, who ensures your support makes the greatest impact possible toward our mission of providing sustainable career opportunities to people who are blind.

As a business with a heart, IFB Solutions hopes that each new year brings a brighter and more inclusive future to the more than 70% of Americans who are blind and unable to find employment. I hope you enjoy reading each of our inspiring stories, and know that we all truly appreciate your support.

Sincerely,



Anastasia Powell

Partner of the Year W. L. GORE & ASSOCIATES

This year, IFB Solutions recognized W. L. Gore & Associates as its 2023 Partner of the Year. Perhaps best known as the developer of waterproof, windproof, breathable GORE-TEX Fabrics, the GORE-TEX Brand specializes in developing highly technical textile materials designed to enhance the user's safety and performance in extreme conditions. Since 2017, the GORE-TEX Brand has played a critical role in supplying materials for many of IFB's departments of defense garments, including the Fuel Handler's Suit mentioned on page 1 and the Extreme Weather Outer Layer Garment (EWOL).

"We have enjoyed a long-running partnership with Gore, and we are excited to soon see their products in use for the FHS line at all three manufacturing locations," said IFB CEO Dan Kelly. "IFB is proud to have W. L. Gore & Associates as a strategic business partner, and we thank them for their partnership, friendship and all they do to create jobs for people who are blind and visually impaired."

For more than 8 years, "W.L. Gore & Associates has worked extremely close with the team at IFB," said John W. Barrasso of W.L. Gore & Associates. "We have enjoyed a strong partnership with every level of their team, from their leadership team in Winston-Salem to their quality and manufacturing teams in Asheville and Puerto Rico. **We understand their mission as a company and the benefit they provide to their local community and the warfighter.** We thank them for recognizing us as IFB's 2023 Partner of the Year and look forward to many more years of continued business success."



*John W. Barrasso,
NA Defense Account
Manager, W.L. Gore &
Associates*

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

Did you know 3 million Americans are currently living with low vision? According to the National Eye Institute, that number will only continue to rise – nearly doubling by 2030, as the last of the baby boomers approach retirement age. For many people, however, low vision or blindness can be a lifelong challenge. Of course, with a bit of modern technology and innovation, there are always ways to adapt.

To see all that's possible in 2024, look no further than IFB Solutions, where hundreds of employees who are visually impaired or blind have built successful careers around the use of assistive technology.

Winston-Salem employee Clayton Sanders, for example, works as a sewing machine operator in the textile department. Born with retinopathy, Clayton is fully blind in one eye, with limited vision in the other – but, with the help of a special magnifier, he's able to perfectly line up materials with his machine, carefully sewing pockets on extreme weather garments to be worn by the U.S. Army.

Clayton has worked in a variety of roles during his 14 years with IFB, but with help from assistive technology, he's swiftly navigated each new task – using reading devices to scan and check inventory labels with small print, special magnifiers to assess details on manufactured goods, and assistive software to read or magnify text on a computer or phone.

People who are blind or visually impaired are “perfectly capable of performing our daily tasks just like a sighted individual,” Clayton explained. But it's devices like these that “give us the same opportunities, the same perceived value that a person with 20/20 vision has. As long as I have the necessary technology to perform the task, no one can tell me what I can't do.”

February, or Low Vision Awareness Month, is a busy time of year for IFB's two Community Low Vision Centers, located in Winston-Salem and Asheville, North Carolina, where both employees and the general public can find personalized assistive devices that fit their needs. Staffed by people who are visually impaired themselves, these centers provide individuals with the tips and tools to live their lives to the fullest – whether at work, at home or out in the world.

Still, it's important to remember that everyone's situation is unique. “What may work for Bob or Sally might not work for me,” Clayton said. So, beginning this month and going forward, “try to be more compassionate toward who people are as individuals;



Clayton is fully blind in one eye, with limited vision in the other – but, with the help of a special magnifier, he's able to perfectly line up materials with his machine, carefully sewing pockets on extreme weather garments to be worn by the U.S. Army.

don't just categorize them all in one group, based on a disability they have. Ask what they need to succeed, and then listen – and then listen again if the first solution doesn't work. We've all got something to learn from each other. You've just got to get out of your comfort zone and work together.”

Creative Solutions *continued from front page*

and Puerto Rico facilities, protects fuel handlers from flash fires and chemical exposure during fueling and ammunition operations. With help from trainers like JoAnn, production of these life-saving suits will kick into high gear when the Winston-Salem manufacturing team adds the FHS production line later this year.

“Fuel Handler’s Suits are very complicated,” said Ruben Quiles, Manager of IFB’s operations at the Cabo Rojo facility. One complete two-piece suit takes 279 steps to create in its product development procedure, from cutting to sewing and assembly to quality control. “But our blind operators, who are all handling multiple operations, are able to master all of them. **We haven’t found a challenge that they aren’t willing to try.**”

For many employees on the manufacturing floor, working at IFB is an opportunity to gain the independence they’ve never had before. Some have waited decades for a prospective employer to finally say yes – to hear the words “you’re hired” – and, here, they know they’re making a difference. Each employee along the FHS production line takes pride in knowing that a soldier’s life is in his or her hands, and every stitch is made with the utmost care.

“What they’re doing out there is critical, and they know it,” JoAnn said. “A lot of times, when the people I’ve trained do a perfect job for the first time, they’ll get so excited they cry – and that really sticks with you. That’s why I love what I do, because I’m not just teaching people to make things of high quality: I’m also helping them be successful.”

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS BY THE NUMBERS

35

Number of jacket and trouser sets completed each day in Asheville

24

Number of jacket and trouser sets completed each day in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico

19

Number of employees currently being trained to work on the Fuel Handler’s Suit line in Winston-Salem

2020

The year IFB Solutions began manufacturing Fuel Handler’s Suits for the U.S. Army

94

Number of employees currently working on Fuel Handler’s Suit line across all facilities



IFB Solutions’ manufacturing operations fall into two distinct categories: textiles and packaging and assembly. Fuel Handler’s Suits are just one of the many textile lines across IFB’s three manufacturing facilities, which also produce mattresses, combat shirts, moisture-wicking T-shirts, Intermediate Weather Outer Layer garments, Extreme Outer Layer Jacket components, helmet pads, all-purpose liners and poncho liners. Many of these products are supplied directly to the U.S. military for use in training, deployment and combat.

Meet IFB's Philanthropy Team

As the nation's largest employer of people who are blind or visually impaired, IFB Solutions needs innovative leaders to create and sustain thousands of jobs that empower and provide independence to people all across the country.

As a nonprofit, however, it also relies on the generosity of compassionate individuals, foundations and organizations who help expand its reach and drive the mission forward — and at the heart of all outreach and engagement efforts is the organization's devoted Philanthropy Team.

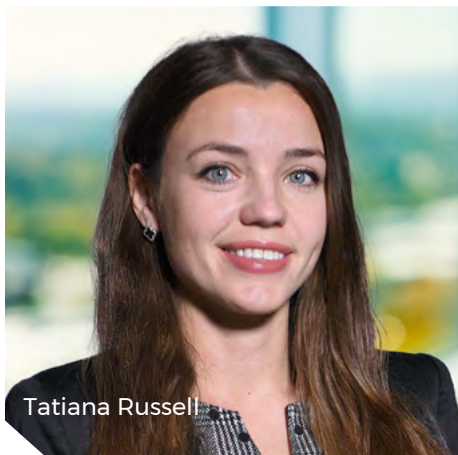


Ged Doughton

"I love what I do," said **Ged Doughton, director of major gifts at IFB Solutions.** "My job is to find and connect with people who have a heart for giving and share this unbelievable story of how

thousands of people were given the opportunity for a job, for a chance to succeed."

Doughton, who has worked for IFB for just under three years, recalled touring the Winston-Salem manufacturing facility during his initial interview and thinking: "I really hope they want me for this job, because I could tell this story for the rest of my life." Now, every time he speaks with a potential donor, he feels he's "representing those employees and all the other people out there who still need help, who we might be able to reach one day."



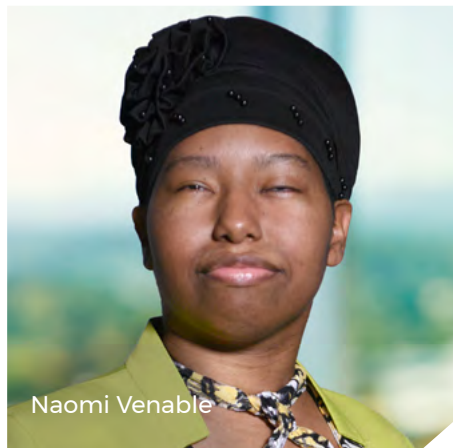
Tatiana Russell

On her first day at IFB, as a then-volunteer with the nonprofit's program for children, **Grants and Development Manager Tatiana Russell** said she was in awe of what is possible when

opportunities are made available to everyone, regardless of a person's abilities. She is now responsible for securing grants that further IFB's

mission, as well as fostering relationships with grants-giving foundations and corporations.

"I wish more places like IFB existed around the world," said Russell, who is originally from Ukraine. "Before moving here, I had never met a person who is blind in my life — not because they don't exist in Ukraine, but because nothing is being done to accommodate people who have different abilities. When I started volunteering for IFB in my early 20s, it changed my world. I saw kids who are blind having fun at summer camp, and adults who are blind with successful careers. It made me wonder: Why isn't it like this everywhere?"



Naomi Venable

For IFB's Development Specialist Naomi Venable, who is visually impaired herself, the chance to support IFB's mission through philanthropic work "means everything to me," she said.

First arriving at IFB six years ago, Venable "started out on the ground level," but she dreamed of doing work that more closely lined up with her own personal skills and interests.

"I got the message out there about the type of work I wanted to do, and they said: 'OK,'" she continued. **"They gave me an opportunity to prove myself and work my way up the ladder. And that's exactly what I did."**

After graduating from the organization's business essentials program, offered to all employees, Venable earned a job on the Philanthropy Team, where she helps manage a database of charitable contributions, keeps in contact with donors and assists with the planning of fundraising events. "It's my job to make sure our donors know that they matter. Every donation means something to us and impacts the work that we do," Venable said.

"You know, 70% of people who are blind or visually impaired are not employed, and it's our mission to change that," she continued. "Before I came to IFB, there were a lot of positions that I applied for, that I was qualified for or even more than qualified for, and they told me no just because I can't see well. So to have been given the opportunity just to have a chance, it makes my work so much more meaningful."



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IFB Solutions employee Jonnie Mae Keith
and CEO Dan Kelly.

ARE YOU, OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW, STRUGGLING WITH DIMINISHED EYESIGHT?



According to the National Eye Institute, currently 4.2 million Americans ages 40 and older are visually impaired.



Of these, 3 million have low vision.



By 2030 the number of Americans with visual impairments is projected to reach 7.2 million, with 5 million having low vision.



Individuals with low vision can typically function at a higher level by using assistive devices such as magnifiers.



Visit communitylowvision.org to learn
about IFB Solutions' resources.