



FALL 2023

IMPACT

Building life-changing opportunities for people who are blind.

HOPES, DREAMS, AND ASPIRATIONS

IFB Career Achiever
Demarious Bowen



What are your hopes – your dreams, your aspirations? And what steps can you take today to work toward those goals? These are the types of questions Demarious Bowens thinks we should be asking ourselves every day.

Legally blind since birth, Demarious has embraced this mindset throughout his life — inspired by his father’s guidance to never let his visual impairment hold him back. It came as no surprise, then, when Demarious was named the 2023 recipient of IFB Solutions’ Career Achiever award.

“When you are blind, some people or employers can be hesitant to give you

opportunities, even though you may be qualified for the position,” Demarious said. “But IFB Solutions always has their doors open for people who are blind and visually impaired. They’re always giving us the opportunity, giving us a chance to grow and be more independent.”

Since joining the Winston-Salem manufacturing team as a sewing machine operator in 2011, Demarious has demonstrated unwavering determination to overcome any challenge he encounters. Always eager to learn, he began training in several different departments before finding a great fit on the optical team. Though Demarious initially worked for the

department as a customer service representative, his supervisor, Frances Crawford-Morris, encouraged him to follow his passion and broaden his horizons through continued education.

In 2016, after more than three months of intensive study, Demarious earned his American Board of Opticianry and National Contact Lens Examiners certifications — becoming just the third person in the country who is visually impaired to complete the requirements. He was then promoted to optical lab expeditor, ensuring that customers received quality products within the timeframe they need. In his spare time, he became committed to helping others achieve the same goal, tutoring his coworkers and other employees in preparation for the certification exam.

“I’ve lived my life overcoming odds and taking on new challenges just like the ABO certification,” he explained. “Like so many other employees here at IFB Solutions, the opportunities I have to pursue a career and build my skills are precious. I don’t know what I would do without the job, the team and the encouragement I receive from the IFB family.

“I’m looking forward to the day when it’s not so special when someone who is visually impaired receives their ABO certification,” he continued. “Losing your sight is incredibly

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CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

IFB Asheville’s Employee of the Year Tony Brake

When Tony Brake was 10 years old, his life took an unexpected turn. An allergic reaction quickly turned into a medical emergency, which left Tony in a controlled medical coma for more than a month. When awoke, his vision was forever changed.

“Things were very fuzzy when I woke up from the hospital,” he said. “I thought my life was going to go back to normal, but then I found out I was losing my vision. It was upsetting at first, but children are very resilient. You find ways to adapt, especially as a kid. Honestly, I was just lucky to be alive.”

Tony began the next school year at the Georgia Academy for the Blind, where he consistently scored among the top of his class. In his teen years, he returned to a public school environment and continued to excel. At 16, he got his first job at Kentucky Fried Chicken, though he said the manager was reluctant to hire someone with a visual impairment — a common theme in Tony’s job search up until that time.

Tony stayed employed in the fast food industry for 19 years, eventually moving up to the manager position, but his vision

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DAN KELLY

Leading by Example

This year, IFB Solutions has been navigating organizational changes and undoubtedly difficult decisions to position the organization for growth and success in the future. As our business enters this transformative period, we remain unrelenting in our commitment to being America's leader in building life-changing opportunities for people who are blind — to saying “yes” to the roughly seven out of 10 Americans who are blind and unemployed.

Over the past several months, IFB Solutions has set its focus on three primary areas of improvement to enhance potential for job growth and product development.

The first, which resulted in the tough decision to close our Little Rock manufacturing facility, was to consolidate our physical footprint to achieve production and operational efficiencies across our manufacturing lines and reduce overhead costs.

“The decision to close the Little Rock facility was not a choice we made lightly,” said IFB Solutions President and CEO Dan Kelly.

Though it was difficult for all of us, this will make IFB more competitive in the marketplace, while also making it easier for IFB employees who are blind to access our on-site support services like training, medical care and transportation.

“I want to sincerely thank everyone across our organization for their professionalism and dedication during these recent changes,” Kelly continued. “Know that this decision was the result of our ongoing work to continue offering sustainable jobs for people who are blind and visually impaired. Until unemployment for people who are blind matches the national average for all people, IFB Solutions is still very much needed in the communities we serve — and we are dedicated to driving that mission forward.”

The second focus is to grow our Workforce Services division, a professional staffing business that provides remote work opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired all across the country. Through our Workforce Services partnerships, IFB now employs 45 people who are blind working in professional positions throughout multiple states. Within the next three years,



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our goal is to grow this number to more than 300 work-at-home jobs, which eliminate a key barrier to work: transportation.

“We continue to be amazed by our Workforce Services teams, and I expect nothing but growth in that division, which directly speaks to our mission of opportunity,” Kelly explained. “One of the largest barriers to employment for people who are blind is just getting to and from work each day, and Workforce Services offers people the tremendous opportunity to enjoy a fulfilling career without having to relocate or worry about transportation.”

The final focus area is on product development and a reevaluation of how IFB sells products in the digital marketplace, specifically through bcsource.com and through our Pinnacle Mercantile storefront on Amazon. Since launching this ongoing objective, we've already seen significant improvements, but our team will continue to assess and, if needed, refine our business strategy to better drive job growth in our manufacturing,

assembly and packaging operations — which serve as great workforce entry points.

“I could not be prouder of the progress we have already made as an organization across these three areas in such a short amount of time,” Kelly said. “None of these things have been simple or easy, but, by working together as a team, we are already well on our way to success. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together.”

During this pivotal and transitional period in IFB's history, the support of our donors is more important than ever to the future and sustainability of this organization. Donor gifts make a direct impact on our nonprofit's ability to continue driving its mission forward, touching the lives of individuals while also making broader strides toward reducing unemployment for people who are blind or visually impaired across the country. ❖



7th Annual Golf Tournament results

Proceeds support job opportunities and workforce training for people who are blind

Total amount raised:

• **\$170k+ (of \$160k goal)**

Thank you to all the tournament sponsors, players, and teams who helped make the tournament a huge success!

Bowens *continued from page 1*

challenging but it should not keep us from pushing ourselves to achieve new goals.”

This spring, Demarious was one of nine employees to graduate from IFB’s Business Essentials program, which, endowed by John Googe and in partnership with Gilford College, was created to help employees gain upward mobility and advance in their positions and careers through additional training and skills-building courses.

Now, Demarious works in the finance department and takes great pride in being the first low vision person to do so. He said he hopes his story encourages others to develop strategic plans for their lives, to always be working toward a higher goal and to believe in yourself — no matter what obstacles you face.

“Never let anyone say you can’t when you can,” he said.

Each year, when selecting candidates to receive its Employee Awards, IFB is overwhelmed with a long list of individuals who each display an unwavering work ethic and commitment to excellence, embodying the very spirit of our mission. Without our dedicated network of supporters, the work of this organization would not be possible — so we offer our sincerest thanks to all who have and continue to help us touch so many lives.



S.E.E. Summer Camps: By the Numbers

75

the number of campers IFB hosted at our **5** camp weeks this summer

50

number of unique children who attended camps (some attend more than one week)

1

week of residential Camp H2O

2

weeks of S.E.E. Day Camp Charlotte

2

weeks of S.E.E Day Camp Winston-Salem

These camps would not be possible without the generous support of our donors. Thank you!

Brake *continued from page 1*

continued to deteriorate, making work increasingly difficult. Then, it became impossible altogether. Living in small-town Georgia, he struggled to find another reliable job — one that would be sustainable for him, his wife Brandy, and their five children.

Then, in 2018, after a long search for gainful employment, Tony and his wife left a message for IFB Solutions’ Asheville Human Resources Manager, Mary Hunter. “And within 15 minutes, she called us back,” he explained. “Before we knew it, we were up here doing assessments for sewing, and a month later, we moved up and I officially started in that department.”

Tony quickly adapted to the new role, then showed interest in expanding his skillset and learning trades in other departments. He trained with and became proficient in packaging in Contract Cutting, Stapler assembly and eventually in assembling and packaging goods in the Impulse Merchandising department. His tenacity and resilience shone through in his work as he adapted swiftly to each new skillset — and this ability to embrace

new challenges did not go unnoticed: In 2023, Tony was named IFB Solutions’ Asheville Employee of the Year.

“IFB gives everyone who works here a sense of confidence,” Tony said. “I’ve always been a pretty confident person, but not everybody is that way, so it’s important to boost people up and show them what they’re capable of. Not only that, it gives you the freedom to go out and do all the extra things that you wouldn’t get to do on a fixed income” — see a movie with your family, go out to dinner somewhere nice. “IFB gives you that extra part of life you might otherwise miss out on.”

In 2023, IFB was able to help Tony and his family in an all-new way, awarding his 19-year-old daughter the Daniel J. Boucher Scholarship, which is extended to IFB employees and their direct dependents to continue their education in accredited universities or colleges. Named for IFB’s former president, the scholarship is presented to employees in good standing following an applications process and will

be granted to Tony’s daughter for the 2023-2024 school year.

“I’m grateful that IFB looks out not only for its employees, but for our family members too,” he said. As for the future, Tony hopes to continue learning — “I’m always trying to do better, get the next step up,” he said — and, one day, he hopes to take on more of a leadership role within the organization. “I don’t want anyone to think: ‘Oh, he’s doing well for a visually impaired person,’” he said. “I want to show people we can stand out among our sighted peers too.”

When you give to IFB Solutions, your donation makes a direct impact on people like Tony, who are so often denied the opportunity to prove themselves simply because of their sight. Thanks to our dedicated network of supporters, IFB Solutions is proud to say “yes” to individuals who have heard “no” time and time again. With your help, we can show the world that people with visual impairments are capable of anything — just like anyone else. ❖



Employment opportunities for people who are blind

IFB Solutions is dedicated to eliminating barriers to employment. We have hired 68 employees who are blind or visually impaired this fiscal year (Oct. 2022-present) and plan to hire 20+ more in 2024.

Donor gifts to IFB help our employees lead more independent lives.



Kathy Turner sewing garments for the U.S. military.



Grant Weathers and Dr. Susan Wise help CLVC patients and clients in more than half of the counties in NC.

Community Low Vision Centers HELPING OUR NEIGHBORS ADAPT AND THRIVE

This fiscal year (October 2022-present) our CLVC's:

- Served 1,433 adults in our communities
- Served 164 children with programs like Focus on Literacy, mobile eye care, and more
- Helped patients and clients in 57 NC counties

These efforts would not be possible without the support of our donors.