

# Packaging entrepreneur: On the road to success

How a dynamic new project, supported by the union, is giving National League of the Blind and Disabled (NLBD) members the chance to set up their own businesses and develop the skills and confidence to run them.

NLBD member Ashley Pearce was among the entrepreneurs showcasing their own businesses to Minister for Disabled People, Anne McGuire, on her visit to the Visage Development Project in Bermondsey, London in early May.

Set up in 2005, Visage is funded by the European Social Fund and led by Action for Blind People (Action). It brings together eight UK and European partners, including Community, to support people with disabilities into employment, particularly those who are visually impaired. 'Visage focuses on improving employment opportunities by developing their job skills and working to change employers' attitudes that prevent visually impaired people from finding or staying in a job,' explains James Lawrence, Visage's Marketing and Dissemination Officer.

Ashley heard about Visage over the tannoy at work. He had been working as a supervisor for Action's packaging factory in Bermondsey for 10 years and was the NLBD branch secretary there. The opportunity it offered was timely, as in December 2006 his local authority decided to withdraw his subsidised funding, which provided obstacles to his continued employment in that job.

'I'd never thought about setting up my own company, I liked my job. As well as the sight issue, I didn't feel I had the business skills to start up on my own. But it seemed a good chance to take the next step into production management. Also jobs for visually impaired people are scarce,' he adds. 'Outside of places like Action there are few options. Before I started there I spent eight years trying to find a job.'

National Secretary of the NLBD, Joe Mann, is well aware of the difficulties workers like Ashley face. 'There are two million visually impaired people in the UK and two-thirds of those of working age are unemployed even though it's 10 years on since the Disability Discrimination Act came into force.

'Community has campaigned hard to defend factory-based supported employment and we continue to do so, as our members tell us that's what they want. Our recent survey of NLBD members showed that 91% preferred working in supported rather than mainstream factories, with people who shared similar experiences, in an environment that understands their needs and where there is proper union representation,' says Joe Mann. 'But for the growing number of people who want to explore other options, initiatives such as Visage offer that opportunity – a chance to earn a living independently and not rely on benefits. It is important that blind people have the same opportunities to work as anyone else, and this is another step towards that.'

In April 2006 Ashley's packaging business Pearce Distribution Services (PDS) started trading. The firm is based at Action's Bermondsey factory and gets IT and telecoms support from the charity. 'We spend about 15% of our time on business training courses and getting advice. Visage has a range of specialists

who helped me develop marketing and business plans to ensure the company would be financially viable,' explains Ashley. 'As the business set-up period is limited to just 50 weeks before we have to go it alone there was an urgency to get these in place.' Visage's ultimate goal is to help the entrepreneurs become self-sustaining. Along with Ashley's, three other 'microbusinesses' had Visage funding and support - a digital archive and a stationery and a catering company. Most started by providing services for Action but Ashley's went straight out into the commercial world.

'At PDS we're the 'middle men'. We pick, pack and dispatch goods sent to us by manufacturers and send on packaged goods to retailers. For example, we pack electronic goods for Palson, Spain's third largest electronics firm, produce wax-coated boxes for the fish industry and pack other items for the fashion and giftware sectors,' explains Ashley. 'So far we've been pretty successful. There have been ups and downs, and setting up a business in under a year has been a big learning curve.'

Including Ashley the business employs five workers, all of whom are visually impaired.

'It feels good not just to have my own business but to be able to provide other visually impaired people with work. One of my colleagues had worked at Action for more than 30 years; another hadn't worked for 10 years – now he has a job he enjoys, working with people who can understand his needs at work.'

The Visage project is due to finish at the end of December 2007, and in June the funding covering all aspects of Ashley's business, including rent and wages, will be reduced so the company will have to bear more of these costs. However, support from the business advisers will continue.

Ashley is positive about the future. 'Short term I'd like to see us pick up a few more contracts. Longer term I'd like to see the company develop as a training organisation, passing on what we've learned about marketing, sales, logistics, fulfilment and warehouse management to others. I've gained a lot of new skills and business know-how, and grown in confidence in my abilities to run the firm, and I'd like others to have that chance too.'



Ashley Pearce (centre) with NLBD members Don Fuller (left) and Ashley White (right)