

New doors open for Scenic Rivers Industries

- Ashley Gordon
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Scenic Rivers employee Natasha Hillian cleaning alpaca fleece, donated by Dr. John Demorlis, as nesting material for their GreenBird eco-friendly bird houses.

Scenic Rivers Industries, Inc. (SRI, but also known as the Sheltered Workshop), is a local not-for-profit organization that came to fruition out of a community-led effort in the 1970s. The late Libby Sanders, along with others involved in the human services field, wanted to help individuals with disabilities find a place of work that prioritizes their dignity. SRI's doors officially opened in July of 1977, certified by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, with 15 employees with disabilities. There are those who

believe it's remarkable that a rural community like Salem was on the forefront of treating these community members with values centered on empowerment, equal opportunity and respect.

Now, the organization employs 28 individuals and continues to highlight what skills they have and put them in positions to succeed.

"Our employees are productive. They love to work, they're proud of their work, and it's up to us to just find what they're good at," said director Joe Bruno. "They show up before we open and have their morning coffee. This isn't just their place of work; it's their community."

Year-round projects include drilling, assembling, packaging and shipping Purple Martin products; recycling; providing lawn care to commercial and residential customers; woodworking projects (picnic tables, benches, bird houses, well houses, and more); and various small jobs that customers call in for.

A recent concern for SRI included a business partner going in another direction with a product the crew helped supply. In turn, the workshop was in a position of waiting to see how a potentially new partner would adopt them into their business model. This company, BestNest, is an online, family-owned distributor based in Cincinnati, Ohio. And their owner/president, Ben Krieger, personally traveled to Salem to see what Scenic Rivers was all about.

It turns out he was impressed.

"They're sophisticated and reliable; I've been all over the country," said Krieger. "They're best in class and second place is far behind."

Krieger invests in shipping materials from Nashville, Tennessee to Salem and then transporting from Salem to his Cincinnati center. That's quite the supply

chain. But Krieger has seen how, from as recent as 18 months ago, there are continued labor shortages in the kind of work SRI employees can offer.

After some time, Krieger took note of how capable the workshop was, crunched the necessary numbers for freight density requirements, and added even more job work to their plate.

Preparing the GreenBird eco-friendly bird house kits requires a precise assembly line.

One employee pokes the necessary holes into biodegradable cardboard while another assembles the kit's thread. The customer uses that thread to add stability to the hexagonal structure.

Another employee teases through alpaca fur donated by Dr. John Demorlis (used to make the nest cozy) to make sure it's clean and ready. Someone else weighs the fur so the same amount goes into each kit.

Finally, another employee packs all of the elements together and prepares it for stapling.

Board member and vice president Dianne Godi recently donated a heavy-duty sewing machine in memory of her mother, Nadine Owen, who loved to sew. Godi, along with Salem's Sheila Hamlet, plan to teach workshop employees how to sew so they can produce the fabric that the birdhouse hangs from on the tree.

Down the road, employees will be able to paint the bird houses with paint made from milk (which makes it biodegradable). As one can imagine, this will require extra steps for clean up so Salem's own Hometown Processing butcher shop donated butcher paper to help protect their tables from spills.

The workshop now also produces GreenBird seed pies. Using recycled material collected onsite, an employee soaks a strainer into a mushy mixture of paper and water, then adds seeds before sandwiching another seed pie on top. After everything dries, the thin biodegradable disc can be placed in a shallow hole, watered, and flowers are enjoyed after blooming.

When asked about how he finds his position at the workshop, supervisor Cody Steelman kept it short and sweet saying, "Oh, I love it," and that's the kind of energy everyone exudes on staff.

Administrative assistant Tina Cook shared that, just like anyone else, their employees have good days and bad days.

But despite any challenge, they carry themselves with positivity, an admirable trait that probably many of us wish we could share.

Cook then pulled out a letter one of the employees wrote to her mom about the pride she has in her work at the workshop. It reads "Mom, I like [the] new work with bird houses...I loved it...I made 13 boxes and mark numbers to know how many I made."

Seeing the employees' senses of ownership and personal achievements, it's easy to understand how fruitful this organization is.

SRI continues to be a bright light in our community. Their recent pivot proves that its mission (which staff and board members have been loyal to since day one) inspires folks around Salem and beyond. On top of all its success, community members and businesses alike are quick to offer their helping hands.

When asked about what readers can do to help, Bruno and Steelman agreed that they could use more alpaca fleece. So, if you find yourself having any on

hand you'd like to donate, call (573) 729-6264. You can also find their biodegradable GreenBird kits online, sold through BestNest, on Amazon and at www.bestnest.com.