

Disabled folks learn vocational skills

By Chris Rizak
staff writer

Sharon Hawkes spoke proudly of her son. At age 20, he has finally received himself for possible entry into the work force. He's meeting his goals and starting to take control of his life.

Finally, it seemed, a mother's dream for her child was about to be realized. But the road to independence and adulthood was a little harder for the Hawkes.

What might have seemed typical trials and tribulations of raising a child were increased to enormous proportions when, at the age of 13, Owen Hawkes sustained a closed head injury that left him a quadriplegic.

Owen is just one of 11 severely multiply handicapped students who are involved in a pilot project being hailed by local educators as a unique and successful approach in providing vocational assessment and training to those who would otherwise be excluded from the work force.

"We have never been able to service individuals with these kinds of disabilities," said Liz Gates, a counselor at New Horizons, a non-profit organization that provides vocational rehabilitation services to disabled Oakland County residents.

"Up to the time this project began, these students received no specific vocational training of any kind in school."

NEW HORIZONS, along with Farmington Public Schools and Michigan Rehabilitation Services, an arm of the Michigan Department of Education, jointly sponsored the project.

It demonstrated, Gates told the audience during an open house at the Novi branch May 28, that through specially devised testing criteria, the

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employment potential of the severely handicapped can be determined.

"Once we've identified students as appropriate for training, there are ways of modifying the curriculum so that the students can benefit," Gates said.

"It was just a matter of being in the right place at the right time," said Mary Lou Ankle, Farmington assistant superintendent for special services.

"This is a real first," she said, adding that before the project, called Physically or Otherwise Health Impaired (POHI), there were no direct methods of helping individuals who needed specially adapted work places.

"I began asking what kind of environment do these students need, what can they do as individuals and where could we get appropriate educational assessments of these kids?"

MENTALLY OR physically impaired individuals in Michigan are eligible for state special education funding through age 26.

After brainstorming with her staff, Ankle decided to talk with Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

As a result, the pilot project, which began in November 1985 and will conclude its first training session this month, evolved.

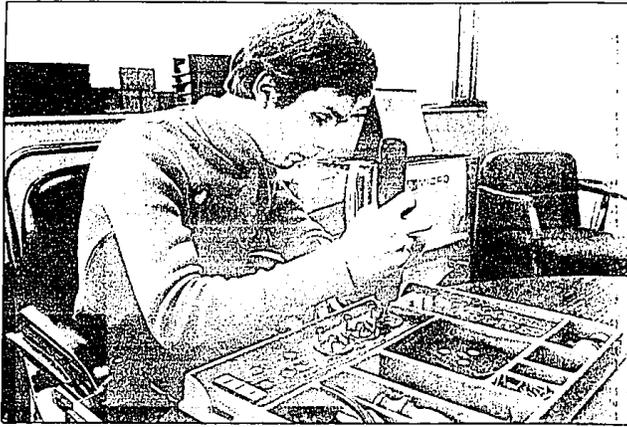
What it means, according to oper-

ations administrator Ron Storing, is that some students will have sheltered workshop skills that will allow them to earn a paycheck.

"The community is starting to become more aware of the presence of the handicapped in the work place," Storing said. "If you look around, you'll see literally hundreds of workers who could be of some use to a company."

"Instead of them thinking that handicapped workers are not cost-efficient, they're starting to recognize that it makes sense to employ them. With these students, their jobs are the most important things in their lives."

Storing canvasses local communities in an attempt to obtain business contracts for New Horizons. Detroit Edison, Champion Spark Plug and Unisys are a few of the major companies that do business with it.



A pneumatic screwdriver makes it easier for Owen Hawkes to assemble a lamp. The lamp assembly is part of the testing Owen and

other handicapped persons have taken to evaluate employment skills at New Horizons.

photo courtesy of New Horizons

STUDENTS, THROUGH use of modified work tools, assemble conduit clamps, bicycle lights, brake shoes and collate pamphlets.

Their progress is assessed continually so that by the time the project concludes, staff members can determine who is eligible for entry into the work force, who needs further training or who may return to the Farmington Schools.

Once a student reaches age 26, he or she must apply to the community mental health branch of the state Department of Mental Health for re-entry into the program.

"The project gave the school district some idea of what was needed to prepare students for our training center," Gates said. "Now they can go back and reassess their special education curriculum."

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