

## AbilityOne Program Success Story

# Student-Designed Assistive Technology Enables Kenneth Thibeault to Excel at Goodwill

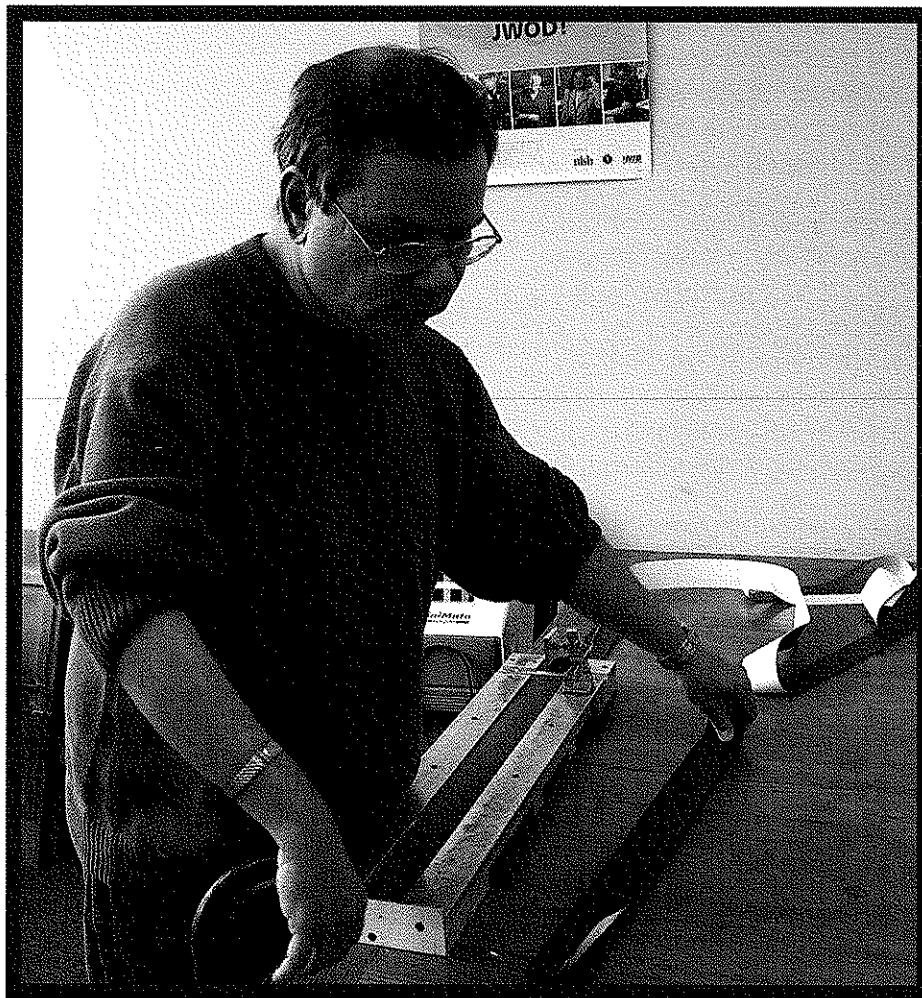
By Jennifer Kuper, contributing feature writer

At Goodwill Industries of the Springfield/Hartford Area, Springfield, Mass., a college student-designed assistive technology, the Improved Tape Cutting Process, is opening new doors for people with severe disabilities. A student of Western New England College (WNEC) in Springfield, Mass. developed the Improved Tape Cutting Process while participating in NISH's *National Scholar Award for Workplace Innovation & Design* last year.

The Improved Tape Cutting Process transformed Goodwill's assembly process of accordion folded report covers for AbilityOne customer, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). It created more than a dozen new jobs for people with severe disabilities, including Kenneth Thibeault, who has cerebral palsy, limited mobility (the use of only one arm) and visual disabilities. Thibeault utilizes the Improved Tape Process to cut adhesive tape to a specific length so that it can be placed along the edge of two folder covers to create a report cover.

"The jig that I use helps me do the job correctly and it's easier to cut tape," Thibeault said.

The Improved Tape Cutting Process, designed by WNEC student Melissa Labrie, enables employees who have the use of one hand or have limited dexterity and mobility to easily and safely cut the tape exactly to standard, thus increasing productivity and wages, and reducing overhead. Labrie



and her team won the second place award in the scholarship competition.

"Working with engineers is a dream come true for any nonprofit that focuses on employment for individuals with disabilities," said Catharine Fleming, vice president, Industrial Services, Goodwill Industries of the Springfield/Hartford Area. "The student engineers of WNEC made assembly operations accessible to all

employees regardless of disability. They designed equipment that improves efficiency, increases output and enhances quality. As a result, our Goodwill has realized significant cost-savings, additional revenue enhancement and, most importantly, increased dollars per hour for each employee."

At the time when the WNEC team began working with Goodwill, the

nonprofit agency's AbilityOne contract with GSA was in jeopardy. Goodwill had been working on the contract for nearly a decade, but needed to triple its volume of production in order to meet GSA's growing needs. However, Goodwill wasn't able to expand its work force due to individual limitations.

"We almost lost a contract and if we weren't able to get additional bodies and still meet the ratio requirement, we would have lost it completely," Fleming said. "The technology was a contract-saver. Quality is built into the system; there is no way you can produce an item that isn't perfect."

Following the implementation of the Improved Tape Cutting Process, the GSA contract expanded from four jobs to 15. The technology eliminated downtime, enabling all members of the team to work on the contract. The enhanced quality of the product, improved efficiency and

reduced delivery time (from 90 to 45 days) resulted in improved customer satisfaction.

For Thibeault and his colleagues, the Improved Tape Cutting Process means they have access to jobs that were previously unattainable.

"It's my responsibility to cut the tape and make sure that everyone has enough to make folders. Some days I'm faster; I also have Cerebral Palsy, I do the best I can," Thibeault said. "I'm healthy so I can come to work every day and do the job right. I have a job and that is important."

Prior to working for Goodwill, Thibeault worked for the Board of Education and Services for the Blind making kit bags for the U.S. Army. He joined the Goodwill team in 2003. Since then, Fleming has noticed that Thibeault's morale has improved. "He is now thinking more about work related issues and is much more

involved in the work than he ever was previously. There is quality of life through quality of work," Fleming said.

Thibeault's supervisor, Catherine Shanley, director of Employment & Training, agreed. "Kenny is very dedicated and he strives to be his personal best. He is reliable, has excellent attendance and is a very eager employee," she said. "With adult learning at Goodwill, the group has provided role modeling and peer mentoring support for Kenny and he has matured in the past year. He is committed to staying on task and has recently taken an interest in trying different jobs," she said.

In his spare time, Thibeault enjoys going for daily walks, going out to eat and spending time with his family, collecting DVDs and CDs, and listening to music. **WP**

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