

July 2016

# Rethinking Possible

How the agency is  
tackling change head on

ablegeorgia™

# *Change is in the Air*

## What's Project Horizon and Why is It Important?



Many if not all of you have by now heard of Project Horizon, the agency's ongoing initiative to serve more Georgians more efficiently. For those who haven't heard about it, consider this a 10,000 foot overview. In the next three to five years, we want to serve 100,000 citizens and get jobs for 50,000. To do this, Project Horizon was broken up into three different work streams:

Organizational Effectiveness (OE), Strategy and Performance Management (SPM) and Value Delivery Process (VDP).

Each of these work streams were staffed by individuals from across the agency, representing a wide breadth of backgrounds and expertise. Each team worked hard, and roughly a month ago, they turned over their work to the smaller Master Implementation Team (MIT) which is now in charge of taking their recommendations and suggestions and helping operational leaders make them a reality. We'll include more on what the MIT is working on in later issues of the newsletter.

### ***Changing How We Do Business***

The VDP component of Project Horizon was tasked with something simple yet quite

complex at the same time: improve how clients navigate the VR process.

To do this, the team started by mapping out how any one individual would go through the process on a large piece of brown paper. From there, they identified every potential hurdle or misstep that could pull the client off course, denoting each with a red sticky note. And that's where the real work began.

Taking into account all of the pitfalls that exist in the current model, the VDP team developed a wholly new model, which in itself cuts down the time it takes a client to go through the initial intake and assessment processes to 64 days. How? By largely centralizing both intake and outreach, at the same time developing a four-tiered client capability track that will allow counselors to fast track clients who are basically ready to work but need minimal supports, while identifying others who may need more comprehensive support like advanced skill training.

Another change: clients will no longer fall off the radar after holding a job for 90 days when their case has previously closed. Instead, they'll receive regular follow up conversations with their counselors to ensure everything is going smoothly and the clients have the appropriate training and technology to

succeed. Where the end game once was a job, with this transformation, the end game will be career.

To help the agency move towards its goal of serving 100,000 Georgians annually, recruitment will begin playing a much larger role in how clients come to GVRA. Outreach specialists will work with schools and doctors' offices and rehab centers—among others—to spread the agency's mission, increase awareness of this mission and further grow the number of clients the agency touches on a regular basis.

Denine Woodson, Director of Outreach and Intake and the head of the VDP team, said the timing couldn't be better.

"It's a perfect storm between WIOA, the ADA amendments, Section 503 changes, E3, the federal employment mandates and the anniversary of the ADA," she said. "It's difficult to step out and say we need to do it better, but it takes bravery to actually be willing to do so. I believe that we have the staff, the resources and ability to be the best VR program in the nation, and Project Horizon has set us on course to do just that."

## ***Strategy Moving Forward***

The Strategy and Performance Management (SPM) wing of Project Horizon was tasked with ensuring that ongoing and future agency initiatives fit the greater values and goals of GVRA as a whole, and it wasn't a small task.

It started first as a discovery process to figure out what kind of initiatives were already in place—initiatives being defined in this instance as anything outside of normal work duties. Crystal Perry, a member of the SPM team, thanked staff for their responses and said they would be incorporated moving forward.

Once the Executive Leadership Team (ELT)

established what values the agency prioritized, it came then to the SPM team to ensure that the uses of staff time and taxpayer dollars were being employed in alignment with those values. A large part of that was determining a process for approval of initiatives in the future. Under this new system, the ELT will approve all initiatives where clients are impacted, additional funding is needed or the Value Delivery Process is impacted, among other criteria.

Ronnesia Barker, the team lead, said that while initiatives in the past may not have been aligned with the greater agency mission, the processes the SPM group put into place will ensure that's no longer the case.

## ***The Right People in the Right Places***

The Organization Effectiveness (OE) team looked to optimize the agency's current organizational structure in order to provide the infrastructure for coming growth.

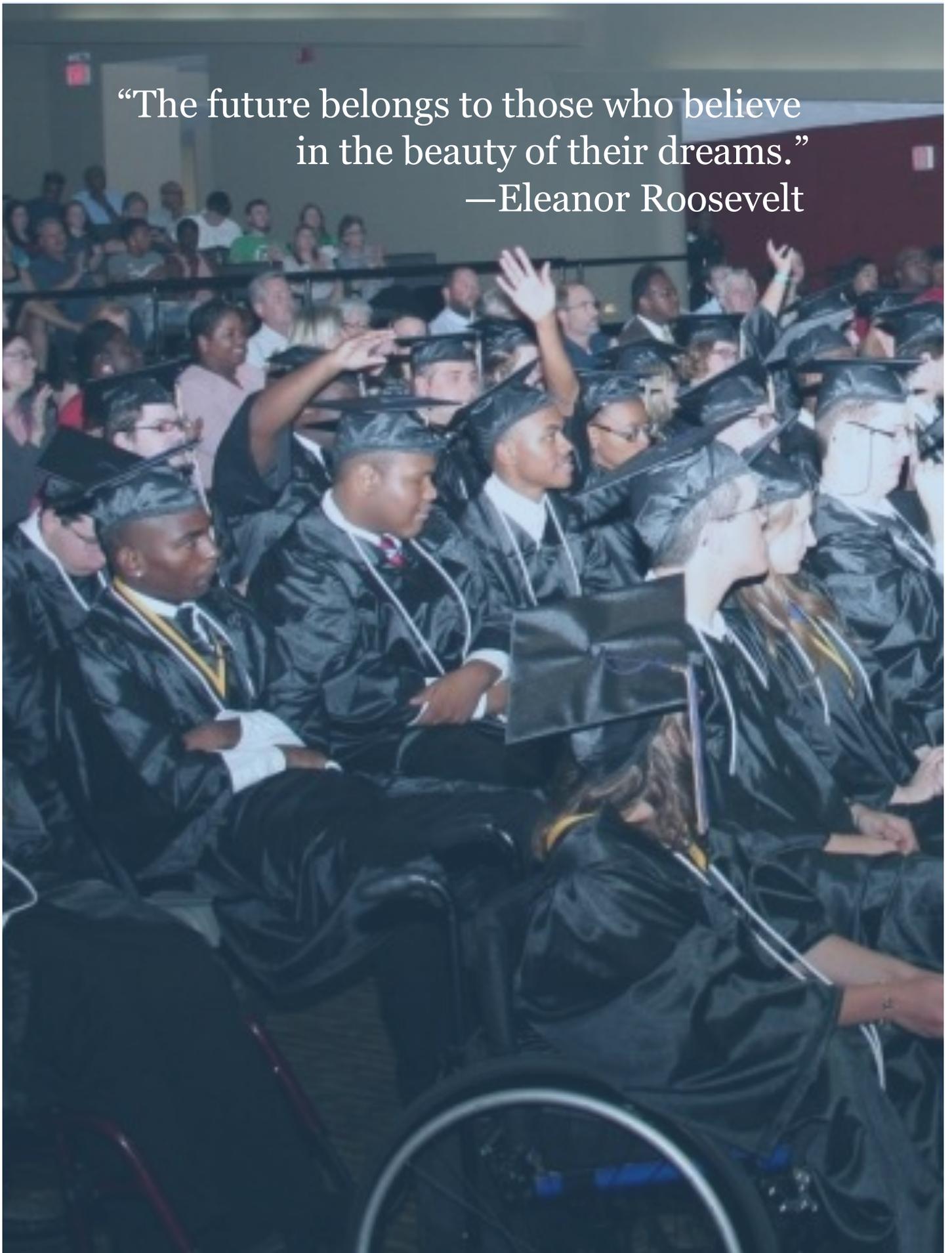
And if GVRA is going to serve 100,000 clients annually, the infrastructure is certainly going to need to grow.

"We need our staff to know that we need them now more than ever," she said. "We need more people if we're going to meet our goals."

Modified organizational charts have already been developed, and while the possibility of new roles and responsibilities can seem scary to some, it's important to remember that the ultimate goal is to optimize agency efficiency by ensuring that the right skills are being used in the best way possible.

The entire Project Horizon initiative has now been turned over to the staff who will be implementing the changes, and once those changes begin to become more concrete, further communications will be forthcoming shortly thereafter. In short: stay tuned.

“The future belongs to those who believe  
in the beauty of their dreams.”  
—Eleanor Roosevelt





# *Never Ever Give Up*

## A Stirring Graduation at Roosevelt Warm Springs

Of the 73 students who graduated from Roosevelt Warm Springs (RWS) on June 30, half of them had already landed a job. This marked a 100 percent improvement over the previous year.

In addition to those who had secured jobs, another 10 had upcoming job interviews, and the fields the new graduates would be going into are as diverse as the graduates themselves. Nursing. Janitorial. Printing. Computers. And the list goes on.

All of the graduates did have one thing in common, though, said Rebecca Fearnow, who spoke on behalf of the graduates. They all shared a firm and fast dedication to follow their dreams, she said.

“Always remember to follow your dreams,” she said. “Don’t give up. Always keep going.”

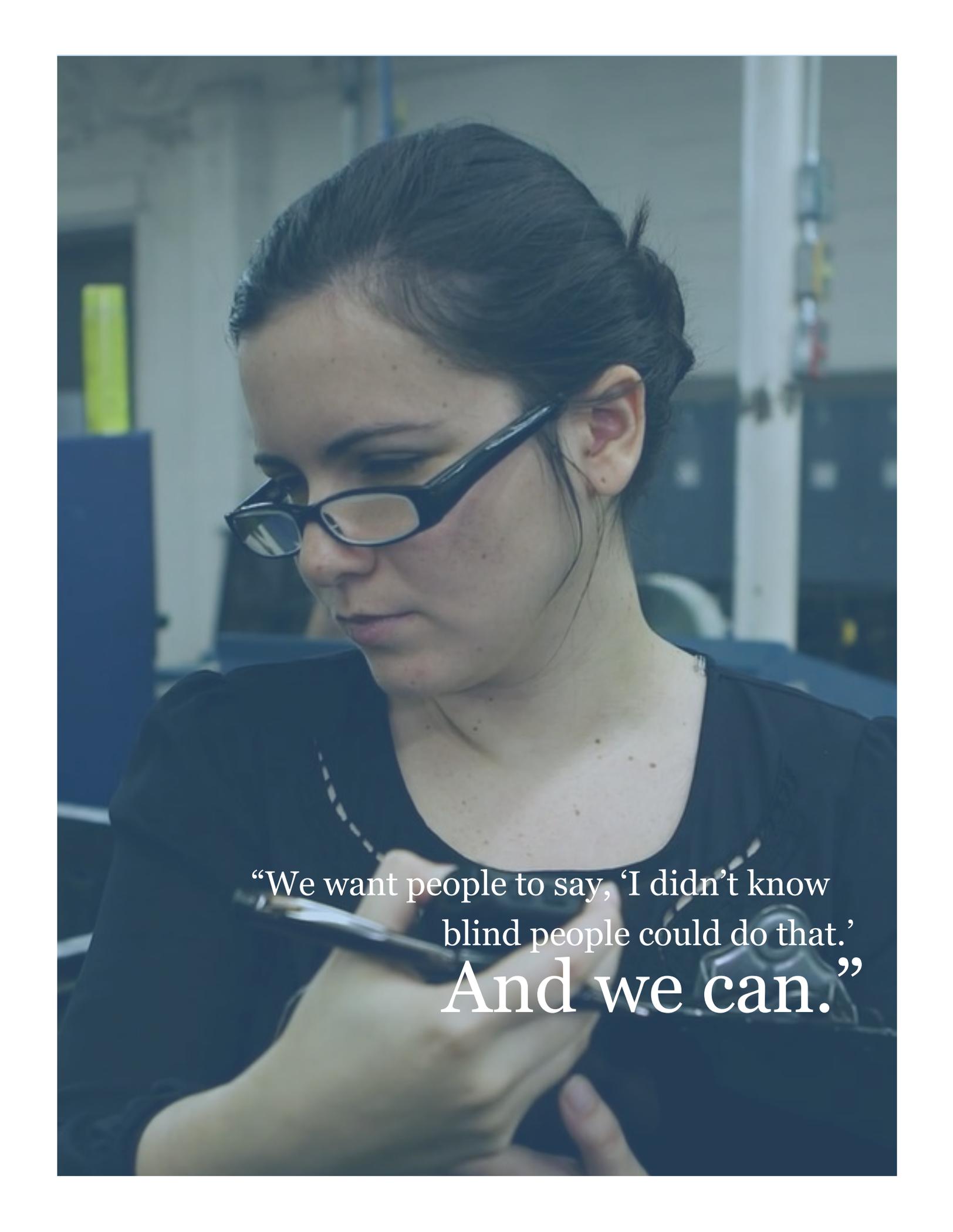
The event marked the end of a journey through self discovery and independence for the graduates. Some described how hopeless and lost they felt before attending RWS, and many of the students took the opportunity to thank friends, family and the RWS staff who helped them overcome self doubt and fully capture their potential.

Vocational training at RWS can take many different forms, and the staff is always looking at training programs that will put the students into real-world jobs upon graduation.

The recent refurbishing of the Employment and Training Building on campus has ushered in advances in the technology students use to learn their craft, and nothing is off limits in the virtual realm. Students can learn to operate a forklift or apply custom paint jobs to cars all in virtual reality. In addition to learning the printing field at the RWS print shop, students now can get hands-on training in 3d printing.

This is all in an effort to ensure that students have the skills to find and maintain employment, said RWS Director Lee Brinkley-Bryan. After all, she said, employment is the ultimate mission.

“These graduates are self-determined young adults, goal driven and ready to set their next goals for the future,” Bryan said. “These students worked hard to reach their goals, but also supported and celebrated the milestones achieved by their fellow students. We are confident that these students will be very successful in their careers and lives.”

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing safety glasses and a dark shirt, is focused on her work in a factory setting. She is holding a tool, possibly a screwdriver, and looking down at it. The background shows industrial equipment and a blue structure.

“We want people to say, ‘I didn’t know  
blind people could do that.’  
And we can.”



# *Being Seen*

## GIB Employee Recognized, Heads to D.C.

Written by Luis Narimatsu

Co-Director, Georgia Industries for the Blind

Alina Garcia Ravelo has been a Junior Industrial Engineer at Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB) for the past two years. In September, she'll travel to Washington D.C. where she'll learn if she's this year's recipient of the National Industries for the Blind's Milton Samuelson Career Achievement Award, and it's no surprise she's in the running, said GIB Co-Director Luis Narimatsu. The following is the application sent to NIB for the award consideration.

During her time at GIB, she has demonstrated to be a bright and hands-on professional with a proven track of successes in project management, production planning and logistics processes. In addition, her fundamental concepts of time and motion studies have helped develop an efficient and economical utilization of personnel and facilities at all GIB sites. Alina's supervisors and co-workers consider her to be a very meticulous and diligent professional, handling her assignments in an efficient manner.

Alina, who is legally blind, is originally from Havana, Cuba. At the age of three months, Alina began showing signs of difficulties with her vision. The doctors prescribed glasses to correct what they thought at the time was Nystagmus, a condition that causes involuntary eye movement.

"Can you imagine, a three-month-old baby wearing glasses?" she said. "It was a real

struggle for my parents to keep them on me."

As Alina grew and developed into a toddler, her doctors continued to run tests, finally diagnosing her with Stationary Cone Dystrophy, a rare eye disorder that affects the cone cells in the retinas causing a variety of symptoms including decreased visual clarity, color blindness, and extreme sensitivity to light.

"I can still remember. I was only like four years old. We were at the doctor's office, and my mother was crying as the doctor explained about my condition," Alina said. "I asked my mom why she was crying, and my mom answered 'because thank god your condition will not get any worst.'"

Alina started school one year before kids her age. She attended elementary and middle school at the school for the blind and visually impaired. Even though it was a really good school, accommodations for the visually impaired did not exist and Alina had to do with just a pair of glasses, a magnifier and a telescope.

Despite being the youngest student in her class, she continuously received awards for her academic grades and discipline. She was a student leader and participated in numerous student congresses and activities.

Alina's high school years were challenging. Just getting to school was difficult. Alina

would spend over three hours everyday riding the school bus while it made its rounds through the city picking up students with different types of disabilities.

“There were only two school buses, and sometimes both were broken, making it a real problem to get to class,” she said.

It was during these years when Alina’s dream of attending the university began to be embedded in her heart and mind.

“Because I always loved math, physics and everything dealing with numbers, I began to dream of one day becoming an engineer,” she said.

Alina researched the engineering field and found out that it had a large area of study with many different job opportunities.

In 2008, after graduating from high school, Alina embarked on her quest for higher education at the Higher Polytechnic Institute

“The first day of classes I walked into my Intro to Engineering class carrying a notebook, magnifying glass and a telescope,” Alina said. “I sat down in the front row of the classroom. As I focused the eye piece of the telescope to view the notes the professor had written on the board, I heard a wave of laughs, chuckles and whispers behind me. The jokes only served to fuel my determination to fulfill my dream of becoming one day an industrial Engineer.”

The university proved to be a challenge socially for Alina. All her life, she had been going to school with children with disabilities. However, at the university she was viewed as different.

“At the beginning, nobody wanted to sit with me or talked to me,” she said. “That changed when the tests started, and my scores were top in my class.”

It didn’t take long for Alina’s classmates and professors to realize that her visual challenge was only part of who she was.

“It was not easy,” she said. “I didn’t get any help despite my condition; there was no assistive technology, no extended time for tests, no large print.”

Alina even had to provide markers for her professors to write on the board since the ones they had were either in light colors which Alina could not see or were out of ink.

Even dealing with some of the professors was difficult. On her second day of physics class, the professor was writing notes on the board. Alina asked him if he could please write with larger letters. The professor said “let see what I can do.” And then he proceeded to write even smaller. “That was one of the worst days I ever had in a class,” Alina said.

As it was, the university was 30 minutes from her house if she traveled by car. By this time, her parents had been able to afford a small car and would drive her in the mornings; however, because gas was so expensive, in the afternoons she had to take public transportation. Sometimes she would spend two hours or more at the bus stop.

“Riding public transportation is like being in a wrestling match,” she said. “You have to push and fight your way onto the bus, and you get bunched up real tight like sardines; I had to kick and fight my way into the bus like everyone else”.

In her last year of college, the university offered her employment and the opportunity to get her master’s degree after graduation. In Cuba, the salary for a graduate engineer is between 20 and 25 dollars a month, and that was what the university would pay her if she accepted.

Alina graduated in 2013 at the top of her class with a 3.8 GPA, thus realizing her dream of

becoming an industrial engineer.

After graduation, Alina began to consider her options.

“I started thinking that I did not want to live for the rest of my life in my parents’ house like everybody does in Cuba; I wanted to have my own house, good food and simple things not available in Cuba,” Alina said.

Alina decided she would find a way to leave Cuba. She spoke with her aunt, who lived in Florida, who offered her assistance and a home.

Alina’s parents were hesitant in the beginning. However, once they thought it over, they understood it would be the best decision she could make.

Alina understood that for Cubans it is almost impossible to get a U.S visa. Alina turned to family members living in Mexico for support, and she requested a visa at the Mexican Embassy.

It took 8 months of waiting before she was granted a tourist visa to travel to Mexico. On September 12, 2013, Alina embarked on her quest to make it to the United States via Mexico.

“I spent a few days with my aunt in Mexico then made my way to the border in El Paso,” Alina said. “I requested U.S protection [Ed. Note: The U.S government grants refugee status to Cubans because of the situation in our country].”

The immigration officials asked her all kinds of questions about Cuban history and culture to make sure she was a real Cuban.

“It was a very scary experience. I spent seven hours in the interrogation room,” she said. “I was searched, questioned repeatedly, then was sat down next to a drug trafficker who was handcuff to his chair.”

After being released by the immigration officials, Alina flew to Florida to meet with her family.

“I immediately felt the difference between Cuba and the U.S.,” she said. “When I asked for assistance at the airport, there was a person there to help guide me.”

Alina moved in with her aunt and uncle in Boynton Beach.

One of her first major challenges to overcome was the language barrier; she knew very little English. She knew she would need to master the language if she was going to find a good job.

Alina found both a school where they taught English as a second language class as well as various resources online, and from there, she proceeded to teach herself English.

Her aunt also took her to request services from the Florida Division of Blind Services. There, she was taught to use Zoom Text and Magic, two assistive technologies. However, her counselor said the only work she could find her was at McDonald’s.

Finally one day, her counselor put her in contact with Luis Narimatsu, who at that time was the recruiter for Georgia Industries for the Blind.

“My first contact with Luis was over the phone. I started talking in English with him and trying to do my best, then he asked me: Do you want to talk in Spanish? That was a relief for me,” she said. “I shared my story with him, how I left Cuba, how I did my engineering degree and the goals I had. Luis helped me construct a stellar resume then put me in contact with Karen Pal from National Industries for the Blind. She interviewed me and sent my resume to different agencies that employ the blind around the U.S. Representatives of each company interviewed me over the phone and

finally I got my first face to face interview ... with GIB, the company where Luis worked”.

On her way back to Boynton Beach after the interview, Alina said to her family “I hope they hire me because I love that place.”

One week later, GIB offered Alina a position as a Junior Industrial Engineer. She was happy, worried and sad at the same time because that meant she would have the opportunity she was looking for. However, she had to leave her family and go to a place where the only people she knew was Luis and his family.

On March 29<sup>th</sup> 2014, Alina moved to Bainbridge with just a suitcase and the determination to succeed. Alina stayed with Luis and his family while she got on her feet.

“In the beginning, working at GIB was difficult for me; I started just six months after I came from Cuba. My English was still not the best, and I still had a hard time understanding some people ... the slang and jokes made it worse. Although I was living with Luis and his family who gave me so much love, I would sometimes get sad because I missed my family.”

Three months after starting at GIB, Alina moved into her own apartment and made the small town of Bainbridge her new home.

As Alina continues to evolve in her studies, her English has improved. She has become an important part of the GIB engineering team. Her knowledge of processes and new concepts has brought with it a series of cost-saving Improvements, including efficient and economical utilization of personnel and facilities.

Alina is currently working on a Master’s Degree in Engineering Management. She has become a home owner and is GIB’s 2016 employee of the year.

“I want to keep growing as a professional and

help to develop new products and services that will provide new career opportunities for people who are blind”.

Narimatsu, now GIB’s Co-Director described her as a woman with tremendous drive and potential.

“Alina has shown herself to be a very bright and intelligent young engineer,” he said. “She has been successful in the performance of all the work entrusted to her and shows a real commitment in whatever she does.”

## *In Memoriam* The Disability Community Mourns One of its Own



Disability advocate William Kermit Holley, Jr., of Winterville, died July 1, 2016. He was known by his friends and family as a tireless advocate for the disabled and a stalwart for the disability community as a whole.

Survivors include his wife Gwendolyn Faulkner-Holley; children, William K. Holley, III, Yaqobi Thomas, Omari J. Faulkner, Bakari S. Holley, Kenya Holley-Sampson, Kala Miller and Ife F. Holley; ten grandchildren; brother Herman Holley; sisters, Gayle Holley Griffin and Marion Holucomb Holley; uncles: Herbert Turner and Talib Zobier and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and life-long friends.

“Bill dedicated his life to helping individuals with disabilities gain skills, confidence, employment and independence,” said GVRA Disability Community Liaison Robin Blount. “He was a great man, and he will be missed.”



“We’re working now ... to make our agency  
**bigger and better.”**



# Strategy and Innovation

## A chat with Raj Gandy about her new position

*Tell me a little bit about yourself. I hear you're a big Alabama fan.*

**Raj:** Absolutely. Roll Tide! I attended the University of Alabama from 1990 to 94 and then went on to Mississippi State University, where I graduated in 1996.

*How'd you get your start with VR?*

**Raj:** I was an intern at Roosevelt Warm Springs in 1996. While there, the Paralympics were going on, and it introduced me to the abilities that everyone with disabilities have.

*How'd you get involved with the Business Enterprise Program?*

**Raj:** Shortly after I graduated from Mississippi State, I came to Georgia and worked at Goodwill for about six months. While I was at Warm Springs doing my internship, I had the opportunity to meet the former commissioner who told me about the Business Enterprise Program. I applied, and that's where I ended up 20 years later.

*Did you start as a counselor with BEP?*

**Raj:** I started as a temporary counselor. I worked in that position for two and a half years. I was then brought on as a full-time counselor where I worked an additional seven months.

I then had the opportunity to apply for a program manager position. I worked there for about three years and then was appointed to director. I was the director since 2003.

*What was the move you made after BEP?*

**Raj:** I was given the opportunity to

become Project Champion for Project Horizon. I started that role in January 2016. So, with being Project Champion, I was responsible for facilitating a lot of the meetings that occurred. Coordinated meetings and ensured that all the strategies that were implemented in those processes.

That position gave me the opportunity to meet people I wouldn't normally come into contact with. I was able to look at the huge amount of resources—and we do have a huge amount of talent in the agency—and the individuals selected for the work streams were all brought together and looked upon as some of our top talent. They definitely didn't disappoint. They provided us with the processes and procedures that we're working with now to make our agency bigger and better.

*Talk a little bit about your new role.*

**Raj:** My new role is chief officer of strategy and innovation. The purpose of my group is to come up with an initiative approval process that will allow us to achieve strategic alignment across the agency.

It was create a centralized repository of projects, and it will be a mechanism for tracking progress, implementing into normal business functions and of course capturing everything we've learned. The purpose of our department is to be able to utilize every grant or initiative opportunity and develop it within the agency. It will segment projects that can go forward and those that need executive leadership's approval.

*Anything else you want to add?*

**Raj:** Nothing but a good old roll tide!

# *GVRA Sponsors Higher Ed For Staff* In Partnership with Mercer, 20 Staff Members Tapped

Mercer University is partnering with the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency to provide the Professional Certificate in Rehabilitation Services program.

Offered through Mercer's Penfield College and designed specifically for GVRA employees, this six-course certificate program prepares rehabilitation professionals to support middle and high school-aged individuals with disabilities to explore employment and to begin the process of creating their individual career paths. Through concentrated courses taught by well-credentialed Mercer faculty members, graduates will exit the program with the invaluable knowledge and refined skill set that will cement them as valued professionals in the field of rehabilitation.

GVRA will sponsor 20 employees who hold a bachelor's degree to obtain this certificate. Each course session will begin with one face-to-face class meeting on Mercer's Macon campus. Remaining courses will be taught in an online format, allowing enrolled students to remain productive at work while

continuing their education. This certificate program was designed in response to a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act initiative to increase the number of middle and high school students who complete high school and advance to post-secondary education or training, or move immediately into employment and begin their career.

Students completing the certificate will be able to demonstrate knowledge of:

- \* Vocational assessments, case management and database skills
- \* 21st century strength-based disability awareness
- \* Post-secondary education and vocational training
- \* Guidance and motivational interviewing skills
- \* The labor market, community partners and employment models

Apply here: <https://mercer.hobsonsradius.com/ssc/aform/N7SB27Goko3mox671mkol.ssc>

## *June Hires*

### Let's Welcome Additions to Our Staff

**VR Cumming:** David Brewton Hodges

**VR Athens:** Christi Bryant Duncan, Aleeshia Lynn Longino

**VR Tifton:** Cindy Ann Mathis

**VR School Districts:** Chester Morris Dever, Devoc Shelletta Doctor

**GVRA Admin:** Melissa A. Divert, Stehany Alicia Sheriff, Charvis Terrell Fuller

**RWS:** Robert M Miller

**GIB:** Dorothy Elaine Kindle, Orlando James Salgado, Malik Abda Tate

**DAS:** TeRaveya Trannette Hayes, Robert Yusef Atkins, Chantry Denise Fann, Lisa Frazier, LaTeashia C. Jones, Dianne Margaret LeMaitre, Shaleea L. Petty, Dorothy Ann Shaw, Leah Marie Smith, Nakita L Sutton





## *Lowe's Blitz in Rome Leads to Jobs*

On a balmy Thursday in mid July, six GVRA clients made their way up the steps inside what looked like a tour bus, but inside, it was anything but. A dozen computers lined the walls. This was the mobile career center, a state-of-the-art, fully ADA accessible mobile computer lab funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and owned and operated by the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission.

Parked in the lot of the Rome office, the Center was there to allow clients who had been selected by Lowe's as potential hires to finish the application process.

The day before, Lowe's conducted a hiring blitz to fill open part-time positions, and those who impressed the hiring officers were invited back to finish applying before touring the facility the next week. Both days were the result of cooperation between the Rome office and Business Development staff.

Paul Ray, the Rome Unit Manager, said the mobile career center allowed staff to assist a

large number of clients all at once.

"It's just great," he said. "We don't have the kind of training space with this many computers, and it helps that everyone can get one on one attention as they finish up their applications."

This is the third time Lowe's has done a similar hiring blitz in association with the Rome office, and of those who participated in previous two events, roughly 30 of them landed jobs.

Lowe's recognizes the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities, Ray said, and in the future, more and more companies will come to embrace these benefits and tap into a workforce that's been previously underutilized.

"It's important for the company because it's good for public relations but also they're getting skilled employees who show up on time and do good work," Ray said.

“We know we’re doing great things.  
This is our opportunity.

**This is our moment.”**



# *It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.*

Written by Greg Schmieg  
GVRA Executive Director

As we continue to push forward with the transformation of GVRA that we call Project Horizon, it is important to acknowledge the reason for the change, the impact of change, and how best to handle change. A recent article in “CEO Coach for Success” states that in today’s new world, it is crucial for all organizations to be flexible enough to change in order to remain relevant. We all know that change occurs in our lives, as it does in our jobs, careers and organizations. We also recognize that human beings tend to resent change and resist it strongly, because the change process can be very distressing. That is why it is important to recognize the different stages of change, which are: Denial, Anger, Dejection, Acceptance, and Learning and Development.

Just as there are stages of change, there are also ways to deal with change, especially in the workplace. Here are some of those tips: Make yourself aware that change happens: it happens in personal life and professional life. You cannot live in the past, so denying change only makes things more complicated for you. Stay alert at the workplace: know what is happening around you, and when you come across clues that hint about the change, acknowledge them.

Anticipate the change process by recognizing the different stages: keep in mind the faster you get to acceptance, the more promising

things will look for you.

Maintain open communication channels: don’t lay back and expect things to pass you by smoothly. You need to get acquainted with the occurring changes, seek more details from your supervisor and peers to form a better understanding.

Assess yourself: change is a time when one’s confidence about one’s skills and capabilities gets shaky. Recognize your strengths and where you could bring them into play.

Don’t be stiff: It will make the change process much harder if you are rigid. Be flexible enough to look at the different angles of the change and see where you could apply your “existing” skills and knowledge, and what new skills you need to acquire.

Stay optimistic: Keep a positive attitude and don’t let yourself drown in uncertainty. Involve yourself in the new process; locate yourself properly in the new scenario. Adjust!

As we unfold and implement Project Horizon, remember the following advice from Robin Sharma, one of the world’s most-sought-after leadership and personal success experts: “You can’t get to the top of Everest by jumping up the mountain. You get to the mountaintop by taking incremental steps. Step by step, you get to the goal.”