

# 'You cannot learn unless you fail'



**FROM TOP: DONALD BIRNEY** secures a Nebraska "N" with practiced precision onto the roof of one of the birdhouses he is making.

**JEFF MEIER** spreads glue on a piece of the birdhouse he is making. Meier and other employees of Vital make all the Nebraska birdhouses from start to finish.

**DOUG VANCE**, an employee of Vital, hammers Nebraska "N"s into a line of birdhouses.

## Company acclimates mentally challenged

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To prepare for those jobs, clients strive to learn job skills and adapt to a work environment, Darla Wiesel, a Vital assistant manager, said.

"Through this organization, the clients gain self-esteem and confidence in themselves that is needed to get to that level of employment," she said.

Each client starts working at the bottom and receives on-the-job training.

About four clients are assigned to each supervisor. Supervisors are always in the workshop when the clients are working.

Some people take longer to learn the skills, while others are quicker. But they strive to eventually work their way to jobs outside of Vital.

Anyone can apply to work at Vital. There are no prerequisites. The handicapped adults are notified of this organization through their caseworkers.

The caseworker finds what Developmental Disorderly Services are available in Lincoln and lets the worker tour the different companies to see which one best fits the person's needs. Vital also draws its employees by referrals.

Vital has been in business for about a year and a half and consists of 26 clients.

The clients are paid every two weeks based on how many birdhouses they build.

The agency provides all the transportation for the clients to get to and from work. The workday starts at about 8 a.m. and ends at about 2:30 p.m. Some of the clients live with their families, but most of them have residential services to care for them.

The clients put together the birdhouses and feeders from start to finish themselves. Clients start with enough materials to make 100 birdhouses in each batch.

The workshop is set up like an assembly line. The clients start with the base of the birdhouse and create all 100 of them. They then work upward until all the wood pieces are glued and stapled together.

Next the clients sand and paint the birdhouses.

The clients then attach the roofs on top

“Through this organization, the clients gain self-esteem ....”

**DARLA WIESEL**  
Vital assistant manager

of the houses and screw a chain into the roof. They then put Go Big Red stickers on the roofs.

The birdhouses the clients build come in two sizes: regular and deluxe. Vital sells them at craft fairs throughout the city and at Russ's Market stores and Super Saver grocery stores. They both sell for about \$10.

The clients take pride in building the birdhouses from start to finish, Carter said. Instead of building only a part of something, they can feel good about the fact that they built something from the ground up.

The organization's motto is "You cannot learn unless you fail."

When working, the managers urge their clients to try everything. And when clients succeed at something, Wiesel said, their whole attitude change.

Supervisors say Rakestraw, a Vital client who works in the office, is one of those successes. Though he prefers phones and computers to the wood shop tools, he has proved how Vital can help develop job skills for mentally challenged workers.

In the four months that Rakestraw has worked at Vital, he has increased his typing speed from two to three words a minute to six or seven words a minute.

Brenda Donner, a supervisor, said Rakestraw has shown he is a hard worker. "When I ask him to do something, he will get right on it," she said.

Carter said that type of success story is Vital's goal.

"If you see somebody do something that they didn't think they could do, their eyes brighten, they get so happy."

Photos by Sandy Summers