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# Riley hopes to keep helping region's visually impaired

By JEFF TOQUINTO

For the better part of the last 39 years, John G. Riley has served the people of Clarksburg and the surrounding area as a worker with the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services.

As a senior rehabilitative counselor for the blind and visually impaired, Riley, an honorable mention winner, in the Clarksburg newspapers' Citizen of the Year contest, has made a world of difference for thousands of individuals who otherwise might not have received help. The often hard, yet satisfying, work is something he could now put aside with retirement.

But the 65-year-old scoffs at the suggestion. Right now, he plans to stay aboard and help persons with visual deficiencies through his work in an 11-county area.

Why?

He labors for the enjoyment of the work, the personal satisfaction and because he knows the plight of those he helps. For a large part of his own life, the Clarksburg resident has been legally blind.

"I had a nail hit one eye and it infected the other one," says Riley, who has two master's degrees from West Virginia University. "It happened when I was doing carpentry work."

Unlike many counselor working with the visually impaired, Riley knows what it's like to have sight and what's it like to live without it. He says his impairment helps him in dealing with those who have similar problems.

"I think a blind person can have a lot bigger impact on the people that I work with as compared to someone without a disability," says Riley.

An impact is exactly what Riley has achieved in his nearly four decades of services to West Virginia. And Riley is proud of what he's accomplished.

"I've rehabilitated more clients than any other counselor since rehabilitation started in 1929," he says with hint of pride in his voice. "Over the years, I'd say I've helped thousands of

people with visual problems."

Although Riley's tasks are many, including aid to 32 individuals already this year, there is one thing he points to as landmark in his years of work.

"In the countries I'm in charge of, I help provide services to the blind and visually impaired," says Riley, who came to Clarksburg in 1958. "I enjoy all of the aspects of my work. Particularly, I enjoy operating the Ocular Prosthetics Clinic, where we've managed to help make artificial eyes for over 600 people in north central West Virginia.

It was through Riley's work with the Ocular Prosthetics Clinic that he was able to make the acquaintance of Michael O. Hughes.

Hughes, an Ocularist who runs an artificial eye clinic in Vienna, Va., met Riley within the year and says the veteran laborer has already formed a lasting impression.

"Long before I met Mr. Riley, I had heard of a man from West Virginia who really went out of his way to help people," says Hughes, who nominated Riley for Citizen of the Year. "I know that he does many services for the blind, but the work he does with me for the blind is almost unheard of."

Hughes, who fits and fabricates artificial eyes, says ocular prosthetics work goes largely unnoticed.

"In the big realm of health care, (prosthetics are) very small," Hughes says. "The fact that he's willing to help direct these people to get a prosthetics device is incredible."

Many of the people Riley has sent to Hughes are low-income individuals with little confidence. That often changes once Hughes and Riley are able to help them.

"John helps people who really have nothing," says Hughes, who has run his artificial eye clinic for 16 years. "Sometimes, their self-esteem is blown because they're missing an eye. Once they have the artificial eye, it helps them get back on their feet and ever get jobs. He directs people here that don't have the resources to get an artificial eye."

Hughes, who has patients from Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., says he has never met anyone who has done more to help people than John Riley has.

From his office on the fourth floor of the John W. Davis Government Building, Riley has helped plenty of folks in plenty of different ways. That fact isn't lost on Larry Bell, supervisor for the Rehabilitation Department.

Bell, who has worked with Riley for the last 22 years, says he has always been awed by Riley's ability to help others.

"He has an ability to empathize with individuals who have visual loss," says Bell. "He's pretty motivational in that he's able to do things with his own visual loss. He's a role model. He works every day and demonstrates that you can overcome anything."

Riley's ability to overcome has helped him in his professional career and personal life. If, and when, Riley wants to do something, he usually does it.

"I think he's pretty amazing in his ability to get around," Bell says. "He's amazingly independent. On top of that, he's a hard worker who's very dedicated to his profession."

Although Riley's career will indeed end in the future, his impact will continue well into the next century.

"Blindness is a severe disability," Riley said. "We pride our work techniques to help people live with it, work with it and be happy with it. We try to open the door for people."

For 39 years, Riley has had a hand in opening many doors. And for thousands of visually impaired individuals, the doors John G. Riley has opened have led to a better way of life.