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# A path to empower those who want it

**W**ho knew that unassuming little SunPass struck to your windshield to get you through tollbooths could tell a tale of empowerment, too?

I am walking through a small warehouse space inside an office building near Tampa International Airport where everyone is busy at work, some putting SunPass transponders on a conveyor belt, others stacking, sorting, sealing and running the sonic welding machine. This place has the contract as sole packager and shipper of Florida's SunPasses — pretty notable, considering who the workers are.

## County credit ratings under review, thanks to debt crisis. 10B

# TAMPA BAY LOCAL STATE BUSINESS

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★ ★ Saturday, July 30, 2011 | 1B

This is the MacDonald Training Center, a place where the mentally disabled get training on how to live and work in the world — to help them lead the lives they choose, emphasis on the “they.” This is the anti-institution for the autistic, mentally retarded and other developmentally disabled, founded more than a half-century ago by parents who saw plainly two alternatives for kids like theirs: Sit home, or live your life out in one of those institutions.

The walls on the way to the warehouse space are a stream of photo success stories. A woman smiles in a Starbucks uniform. A bag boy stands in a Publix parking lot, arms thrown out, grinning. They will show you a picture of a man named Steve sitting near the fountain of an apartment complex, where he finally lives the way most of us take for granted: independently. People who work here laugh about how Jim Freyvo-gel, president of the place, recently called one of his favorite clients to take him to lunch for his birthday. Sorry, came the reply, his co-workers at his job at the medical supply place already booked him.

The most remarkable thing, though, is the art. It's everywhere, in the art rooms where classes are held and displayed in the donated studio. And it's amazing — faces, landscapes, abstracts, a chair decorated with odd objects, art you would see at a gallery.

Clients who could not be reached otherwise, who did not know what end of the paintbrush to use the first time, have flourished here. Art from this place was submitted for banners to be hung in the West Shore business district, though the people doing the choosing weren't told where it came from. It won.

In the work area, MacDonald Training Center had handled lots of smaller projects, commercial sewing and such. Getting the SunPass contract in 2007 was something else. By the end of 2010, they had packaged more than 2 million transponders with fewer than 135 mailed mistakes. “An error rate of 0.005579 percent,” people here tell you with some pride.

But in this economy, “warehouse housing” takes on a darker connotation. The people who run this place rely on federal and state funds and are expecting a 12 percent cut in coming months, with more to come. They worry about a hardening of hearts among legislators who can't see past that immediate bottom line. They worry we could slide back to the days paying for institutions and no more, instead of places to help people live, work, contribute and thrive.

Around me the warehouse hums with life, workers chatting or concentrating hard on the task at hand. Over heads bent to the day's work, someone has hung an old-fashioned birdcage, something whimsical and fun. It appears the bottom of the cage is missing, though, as if anything in there could have wings if it wants.