

Article published Oct 31, 2005

Inmate to Leave Prison as a Dental Technician

RAIFORD - In about a month, inmate Louis Cravens will leave one of Florida's most secure prisons as a free man.

Cravens is scheduled to walk out the front gate of Union Correctional Institution on Dec. 12 carrying a national certification that has already landed him a job in the Midwest that provides a paycheck in the mid-\$30,000-a-year range.

"My previous careers were construction and bartending and what got me in here - drugs," said Cravens who has been in prison since 1998. "Now I am getting a really good job."

Cravens is one of the first three inmates in the United States to become a nationally certified dental technician while in prison.

Earlier this year, Cravens, 35, and inmates Craig Mrozowski, 46, and Wesley Trapchak, 40, all passed the two written and one practical test required by the Tallahassee-based National Board for Certification in Dental Laboratory Technology.

Prison and board officials said this is the first time the exams were given behind a prison fence. The inmates qualified to take the test by learning the trade of making dentures and crowns and other dental replacements while working at jobs that pay 20 to 50 cents an hour inside the Prison Rehabilitative Industries and Diversified Enterprises Inc. (PRIDE) dental lab at the state prison.

The PRIDE dental lab serves all of the prison dental clinics in Florida as well as more

than 700 dentists in 45 other states. The lab is run by P.L. Pellett, a retired Naval chief, who is assisted by two of his former bosses in the Navy, Mike Kohrt and Mark Rosenberg.

The retired Navy men have a combined century of dental lab experience.

"This is not a career for everybody, but once you get into it and realize that you can do this work and be good at it, you tend to stay with it," Pellett said.

Since Pellett took over the lab about five years ago, two other inmates who learned the trade inside the PRIDE lab were released and accepted dental technician jobs at labs in Gainesville and Orlando.

"We still hear from them, and one guy is now a production manager in his lab,"

Pellett said. "You can go on and get a job that pays \$50,000 or more after a couple of years in a lab."

Trapchak, who is serving a life sentence for robbery in Broward County, said the dental lab work he has learned to do in prison for a small fraction of what he could earn in the free world has worked on his own character.

"This program has allowed me to grow from who I was to who I am," Trapchak said.

"I don't know if I will ever leave here (prison), but this work gives me the opportunity to believe I am helping other individuals because I know I can make something that will give someone their confidence back because they will be able to smile again."

All dental lab workers had to pass a manual dexterity test just to be considered.

"We give everybody a carving test, but we don't show them what we want," Pellett

said. "We just give them the written instructions - the description - and a few tools like a pencil and a ruler and knife, and then see what they can do."

Those who do well with the carving and interview process are offered one of the 52 available slots. Then the real stress begins.

"We give them a list of dental terms and about two weeks to learn them and we teach them some of the basic things," Pellett said. "This is a real stressful field because it demands perfection and not everyone can do it."

Among those able to handle the stress of perfectionism is an 83-year-old inmate who is more productive than others who are decades younger.

In the outside world, being able to perfectly craft dental work rapidly can pay thousands a month.

"Pay depends on the quality of work and on volume," said Lance Rodan, director of the certification national board. "This is manufacturing, so a good volume pays higher."

Rodan said there are about 6,000 certified dental technicians working in the United States today with demand for more even though certification is not a universal requirement to work in a dental laboratory.

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