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Published: March 10, 2013 3:00 a.m.

# Blue Jacket nonprofit expands 2nd chances

**Vivian Sade** | The Journal Gazette

David Casiano already had one charge of operating while intoxicated, so when he was again caught driving under the influence last year, it was a felony.

In short order, he found himself without a job, owing multiple court and legal fees – and jailed.

Today, Casiano, 57, is employed at a janitorial job in New Haven, attends meetings for his addiction to alcohol two or three times a week and has a positive outlook on his future.

He credits Blue Jacket Inc., a not-for-profit company that serves the disadvantaged and provides training and employment to ex-inmates and other disadvantaged populations.

“Blue Jacket helped me realize what I had to do,” Casiano said. “It was the biggest help I ever had.”

He returns weekly to volunteer at the organization’s newest venture – a 7,800-square-foot retail clothing store that opened this month.

Blue Jacket was a pilot project of Allen County Community Corrections but spun off on its own about eight years ago.

The company operates Opportunity Staffing, an employment agency, raises and sells produce from its 38 raised gardens and offers a four-week Career Academy where clients decide their own destinies.

The leader of the organization is Executive Director Tony Hudson, son of Sheila Hudson, Community Corrections director.

Tony Hudson grew tired of the red tape and endless government regulations of prisoner reform. After looking at successful programs in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, Hudson broke away from the red tape and bureaucracy and formed the company.



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Julie Asbury, left, and Kristina Main search for office wear at Blue Jacket, a nonprofit that aids the disadvantaged.



Samuel Hoffman | The Journal Gazette

Tony Hudson is the executive director at Blue Jacket Inc., 2826 S. Calhoun St. He created the organization to help out people looking for a second chance.

## Blue Jacket Inc.

**What:** Blue Jacket clothing store

**Where:** 2826 S. Calhoun St.

**When:** Open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

The prisoner re-entry initiative program offered through the U.S. Department of Labor granted about \$400,000 a year, but Hudson felt too much time was spent on mandates.

**Available:** Professional wear – suits, dresses, pants, shirts, jackets, purses, belts, ties and shoes – all priced to sell for \$5 or less

“We were moving away from the mission of the program,” he said.

Federal regulations, however, restricted the program to serve only ex-offenders. But by becoming an independent nonprofit, Blue Jacket could offer its services to non-offenders such as the homeless, veterans and low-income residents.

## Rebuilding lives

About a year ago, Blue Jacket moved from a small building on Rudisill Boulevard to 2826 S. Calhoun St.

The 19,000-square-foot building houses its Career Academy, Opportunity Staffing and the Blue Jacket clothing store, while still having space to lease other businesses.

The center has a computer lab, classrooms, human resources department and a recreation room specially designed for parents just out of prison to reconnect with their children.

After Casiano graduated from Blue Jacket’s Career Academy six months ago, he landed a full-time job through Opportunity Staffing.

Casiano learned a lot about completing a professional résumé and how to conduct himself in an interview, giving him the confidence to land a job, he said. Without that help, he feels he might still be hunting for a job and might even be back in jail for a probation violation.

“We have a certain amount of time (after being released from prison) to get a job or it’s a violation. I’m just not sure I could have done it without the Career Academy,” Casiano said. “Blue Jacket helped me focus on my attitude and provided me with an opportunity, and I really enjoyed it.”

## Clothing store

When the Career Academy started, rules required students to be dressed professionally at all times, even when working in class.

Many of them came from jail with “\$7 and a little bit of lint in their pocket,” Hudson said.

A clothing bank made up of donations was established. But soon the clothing bank had more donated merchandise than the staff could give away, Hudson said.

That inventory has morphed into a full-scale retail clothing store for men and women that opened to the public this month.

Blue Jacket used the services of IPFW business students, who drew up a business plan for the store, Hudson said. The store will employ up to three transitional employees while they are students of the Career Academy, usually for about four weeks, Hudson said.

The store has a laundry and pressing room and a tailor shop with two experienced seamstresses to offer alterations.

Currently, Blue Jacket leases the building for \$1 a year from AWS Foundation, but the foundation has offered to donate the building in the next few months, Hudson said.

## Umbrella of services

Career Academy students focus on learning soft skills such as communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking and professionalism.

Students are required to be on time and perform daily assignments and tasks. Violators are dropped from the program, Hudson said.

Anything that can help with the students' foray into the workplace is considered, Hudson said.

One room houses a technician – and a former Blue Jacket graduate – who offers tattoo removal at cut rates or for free, getting rid of tattoo blunders and saving the students thousands of dollars.

There is a mental health counselor and a pastor. A break room has been transformed into a shop so students with barber or beautician training have a spot to build their businesses before breaking out on their own.

More than 30 local agencies partner with Blue Jacket to offer their services.

"Our focus is on two things – pre-employment training and job training and placement," Hudson said. "We partner with others to provide services, so we can stay focused and good at what we do."

The county also partners with Blue Jacket for its services. Allen County Community Corrections budgets about \$80,000 a year for Blue Jacket services.

And word is spreading about the various services.

There is now a waiting list for the Career Academy. The organization turns away about 120 people a year who ask to be in the program, Hudson said.

Although the program costs \$287 for each graduate, most of that is paid through a scholarship grant provided by donations, Hudson said. Scholarships are available for those who can't afford it.

"We ask each client to pay \$30 for the Career Academy so they have some investment in the process," he said.

About 18 percent of Blue Jacket graduates return to prison. That is significant when compared with the Indiana Department of Correction's rate of 38 percent, Hudson said.

## **Success story**

The Blue Jacket classrooms offer hands-on training. Students must make cold calls to find out who is hiring and draft and send letters to those employers.

Out of a class of 12 making cold calls and sending letters, usually three people will get a job, Hudson said, adding that overall the classes have a 61 percent employment rate.

"They are usually employed within three months," he said.

One of the center's best success stories is "Downtown Larry," or Larry Thomas Jr., who heads up the Clean and Green team, a group under the umbrella of the Downtown Improvement District, Hudson said.

Thomas and his team haul trash, clean, trim bushes or branches that may obstruct paths, shovel walkways and address safety concerns in the downtown area.

Thomas, 43, had a pending felony that was dismissed after he completed a drug court program, he said.

He had always worked, but his training at Blue Jacket four years ago opened some doors, he said.

"It gave me the skills and training I needed," Thomas said. "I am very grateful to them."

The training helped Thomas get back on track.

"Instead of being a problem to the community, I am now a solution."

Allen County Councilman Bill Brown was on the Downtown Improvement District Board of Directors and had also served on the Blue Jacket board.

Brown was involved in the decision to hire Thomas.

"People need opportunities," Brown said. "I am a believer in second chances."

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