

Davis English
Head: The Visionary

The freshly fallen snow crunched beneath my feet as I made my way across the parking lot. My hand was wrapped tightly around that of a little girl who was nervous about getting her first ever eye exam. The snow slowly melted softly into her dark brown hair and into the hood of her plush pink sweatshirt.

I met Dylan O'Brien in a white trailer in the vacant parking lot of an old middle school in Fort Collins, Colorado. We were at a yearly event called Children in Need put on by a local homeless outreach organization called Homeless Gear.

“Everything is going to be a-ok,” O'Brien said to the girl as he tied a balloon around her delicate wrist. “You’re going to be able to see better now.”

Her sniffles echoed out the door of the trailer as the endless line of customers filed into the small, portable optical clinic. Next up was an older gentleman with a gentle face that seemed worn by the sands of time. His wispy gray hair escaped from underneath a Chevrolet ball cap as he sat down to begin his eye exam. O'Brien was just as thoughtful and deliberate with this older gentleman as he had been with the little girl. He was in his element.

As the event settled down and my duties as a volunteer came to a close, O'Brien was still in his trailer seeing clients in desperate need for glasses. Eventually, his workday came to a close when the last of his customers strolled out of the trailer with an order for a brand new pair of glasses on the way. O'Brien was still smiling.

I knocked on the trailer door for a split second before I was greeted by a bright and shiny face through the open doorway. O'Brien is a tall man – about 6 feet 2 inches – with a rosy complexion and a childish grin. A 30-year-old Front Range Community College dropout, he walked duck-footed in the somewhat spacious trailer in search of a cup of coffee that he could give me on that snowy Saturday afternoon.

We never sat down while we talked – O'Brien had too much to do. He started his mobile optical service trailer, The Glasses Guys, in May of 2013 after working various jobs in optometry clinics since 2009.

“I noticed that too many people were getting turned down for glasses based on a lack of insurance,” O'Brien said. “It bummed me out to think that these people who couldn’t see would continue not being able to see at the expense of our outdated insurance policies. Vision is a right, not a privilege.”

As the snowflakes descended to the pavement outside the cozy trailer, O'Brien reminisced on how his business got its start.

“Basically, The Glasses Guys started in 2013 under the name Hip-Hoptical,” O’Brien said. “Our goal was simple: give one frame to a person in need for each frame we sold – kind of like Toms Shoes (a California-based company that donates a pair of shoes to an impoverished child for every pair they sell).”

After pouring everything he owned into the company, O’Brien spent the better part of a year sleeping on friends’ couches and smelly futons – anything he could find. His savings account and a \$2,000 donation from his parents had all gone toward purchasing frames and display cases for events. Since he didn’t want to go the typical route of a storefront, O’Brien decided that he would take the glasses to the masses. To perform this service free of charge, however, would take a great deal of help from the U.S. Government.

“It wasn’t easy applying for all of the loans and grants to get my business started,” O’Brien said. “I literally camped out in front of the government offices and filled out paperwork every day for about three or four months. They eventually got sick of me and allowed my business to be paid for purely with Medicaid. They must have really gotten sick of me when they started granting me money to get the business going,” he laughed.

After a few rigorous months of working events for underserved communities, O’Brien grew tired of the set up and tear down procedures that his glasses business demanded.

“At first, we didn’t have the trailer,” O’Brien said. “I would have to set up all of my frame displays, tables, exam chairs, exam equipment and everything for about five hours beforehand and I would take it all down for an additional three hours afterward. I was working 14 to 16 hour days nearly every day – it was just unsustainable for me as a human being.”

When Colorado State University gifted him one of their old Dodge Ram trucks for being an outstanding charitable organization, O’Brien came up with the idea to make a permanent mobile optical store and clinic out of a trailer and tow it behind the truck. He bought an old nondescript trailer that was coming apart at the seams and went to work.

“We stripped the entire interior to make room for all of the frame displays and exam chairs,” O’Brien said. “After that, we filled it with what we needed for the business, installed air and electrical, got it cleared for business through some governmental office and we were rolling. Man, it’s so much easier hauling this thing around than setting up and tearing down a display every day.” A large sigh of relief escaped his chest.

O’Brien serves not only as the company’s CEO, but also as their optician. With this title, he is in charge of fitting the client with frames and lenses, but cannot perform the eye tests or write prescriptions. The two optometrists that he hired when he got the trailer up and running take care of these duties due to their more extensive and specialized training. With his two optometrists and his assistant that helps with paperwork, O’Brien has assembled a well-oiled working unit that can test vision, prescribe lenses and fit glasses all in one stop.

“We really focus on taking the service to the people that we are serving,” O’Brien said. “For many of them, transportation is an issue, so the fact that we can bring all of their needs directly to them is huge.”

After a few months experience on the road and hundreds of clients served, O’Brien’s business is really starting to take off, and he couldn’t be more proud.

“I started off a broke kid with the idea of fixing eyes – that was it,” O’Brien said. “But I persevered and bugged the feds enough into helping me make that a reality. I was without a home, I was without a car, I was depressed at times and I made some people close to me very angry, but I wouldn’t change a thing. It’s giving sight to the sightless. That’s, like, Biblical or something.”

With partners like Homeless Gear putting on events for low-income citizens, The Glasses Guys are beginning to achieve their dreams one frame at a time.

“Connections with organizations like Homeless Gear have given us the opportunity to go out and reach the segment of the community that we’re after,” O’Brien said. “Low-income families, folks without insurance and the homeless population are all part of that segment. Our goal is to fit as many of these people with frames as we can in a timely fashion. Being able to go directly to them with a trailer and let them pay with Medicaid has been a huge boost, but partnerships with companies that deal directly with these people has helped the most.”

As O’Brien’s company lifts off the ground and onto the road, he’s not done revolutionizing optometry in Fort Collins.

“I just ordered a custom lens cutter so that we can fit people with new glasses in the shop,” O’Brien said. “Before, they would have to wait about a week for us to order their lenses, but they’ll be walking out our door with their complete glasses soon. We also plan on working more events and we’re always expanding our frame selection.”

I looked around at all the optician equipment that surrounded me and could hardly believe that it was this one man’s brainchild. He seemed normal enough, but he had a belief in an idea that set him apart.

As we talked into the afternoon, the snowflakes kept piling up out on that frigid blacktop. I glanced out the window and contemplated how many people O’Brien had helped so far through the short life of his business. In a moment of clarity, I realized that the number didn’t matter – I just remembered that little girl with her new pair of glasses.

Sidebar:

Glasses and Low-Income: The Numbers

- The average cost of an eye exam in the U.S. costs \$50 to \$100.
- An average pair of standard prescription eyeglasses in the U.S. costs \$159.
- Low-income families often cannot pay for glasses because they have to pay for more immediate necessities.
- Many low-income individuals have no means of transportation to get to optometrists and opticians.

Source:

http://health.costhelper.com/eye_glasses.html