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Developer plans to build condos on Ocean Springs waterfront

BY ANITA LEE
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An experienced developer from the Jackson area has optioned almost seven acres that

anchor the western entrance to Ocean Springs along Front Beach Drive and Porter Avenue for a potential condominium development, but plans are preliminary.

Developer Steve Bryan con-

firmed that his company, Ridgeland-based Mid South Companies LLC, has signed an option to buy the property, owned by Naomi Enterprises L.P. But Mid South is completing due diligence to determine whether the

project is feasible. Bryan said he has met with the city but no formal plans have been presented, despite a copy of a proposal leaked on Facebook.

"We haven't even named it," said Bryan, president and CEO of Mid South in Ridgeland. "It's in its infancy. We're just nowhere near having this thing ready."

The company has developed houses, condominiums, apartments, commercial properties and office buildings in Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi.

The Ocean Springs property, listed at \$7 million by owner Naomi Enterprises LP, is special





HANNAH RUHOFF Sun Herald

Antonio Williams, an instructor at the Mississippi Emerge Center, demonstrates how he teaches students cane navigation.

Blind students learn vital skills at new South MS campus

BY JOHN BUZBEE
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The EMERGE Center in Long Beach, a total-immersive institution created to prepare blind clients to live independently, opened its doors last

week with its first classes.

The clients, or students, are prepared with functional skills for blindness, whether they are totally blind or have partial blindness. Similarly, instructional staff teach those students totally blind, wearing sleep shades if applicable.

Instruction includes everything from safely walking across the street to office work to cooking lasagna — and cleaning the kitchen afterwards.

Those practical skills are only half the battle. Instructors also are meant to lead by example and show students what it's like

to live with confidence. That confidence is something that'll carry with them for the rest of their lives and transcends just the tasks they'll learn at the EMERGE Center.

In the face of a world that

SEE STUDENTS, 10A

Why are semi-trucks getting hit at Gulfport rail crossings?

BY MARTHA SANCHEZ
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The train barreling through Gulfport could not stop.

A semi-truck in its way could not move, and police said the driver leapt from the cab and fled.

Moments later, the train slammed the 18-wheeler.

Thursday was the second time this year a train collided with a semi-truck on 33rd Avenue in Gulfport.

And city leaders say the

crashes signal troubling oversights and are raising questions about why truckers attempt the crossing at all.

"It's repetitious. It shouldn't be happening," said Gulfport Councilman Kenneth Casey Sr., who represents the neighborhoods north of the collisions.

But despite signs that warn of low ground clearance, Gulfport Police Sgt. Jason Ducre said many truckers think "I'm just going to chance it."

"Next thing you know," he said, "they're hung up on the tracks."

The trucker was not injured on Thursday. Neither was the driver of another 18-wheeler struck by a train in February on 33rd Avenue.

Casey said the crossing has "plenty of safety measures," and that responsibility falls on the truckers. There are two signs on each side of the crossing that warn drivers of low ground clearance at least a block in advance. The crossing has signals and lights.

"They just ignore it," Casey

SEE TRUCKS, 2A



A train struck an 18-wheeler Thursday on W Railroad Street in Gulfport.



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STUDENTS

largely doesn't know how to treat them, students at the EMERGE Center are thrust into a program where they live with independence, albeit with reasonable safety nets. Staff will help students nearing the program's end secure job experience and internship opportunities. Then it's up to those students to put what they've learned into action as they live independently — and confidently.

It's a first-of-its-kind, certified facility in Mississippi and one that the community needed, said Dorothy Young, the director of the Office of Vocational Rehab Services for the Blind, a division of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services.

It differs from the Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center in Jackson, the only comparable facility in the state, Young said. Addie McBryde functions by meeting clients to their specific needs, blind or not. Instruction isn't designed around total blindness, she added.

The EMERGE Center, by contrast, is a dedicated facility only for the blind and gives instruction to its clients under the assumption they are totally blind. Blindness is a spectrum that affects each person with it differently, she noted.

The program is free for qualifying clients, Young said. It keeps students who are in-state close to home and usually takes six months to nine months, though every case is different. The center in Long Beach uniquely teaches them how to live blind in suburban communities, unlike facilities clients previously needed to go to in Maryland and Denver.

THE FIRST STEP

Instructor Antonio Williams said blind people are often tempted to avoid telling themselves and others they're blind, especially if they're in the process of losing their vision. This is true even if it obviously inhibits their regular functions.

It's usually because they don't want their fully-sighted peers to think of them differently, he said. That was the case for him while he was losing his vision, he said, chuckling a little at the thought of himself.

Lots of people have good intentions in the way they act around blind folks, but friends and family can often be over-protective, which leads to stunted development for the blind.

Sighted folks burn themselves on the stove too, Young said. But if a blind person does it, their family will often overreact and forever push them out of the kitchen. That can create a long-term, unnecessary dependency on sighted relatives. It can also unknowingly kill the drive for those blind folks to pursue independent living and career success.

"Most people have humble goals," said Fred Schroeder, a consultant

who's helping the EMERGE Center as it gears up. He's made a career traveling the globe inspiring blind clients and coordinating with facilities like the EMERGE Center.

Most blind people just want some autonomy and the ability to go outside on their own, Schroeder said. Being realistic, it's probably impossible to become a heart surgeon as a blind person, he said. But that's not usually what blind folks are aiming to be.

Working in information technology — one of the goals of an EMERGE Center client — is a possibility. Young says that when the time comes, staff at the EMERGE Center will ensure the student is not only prepared to interview for the job, not just general living skills.

HOW SOCIETY VIEWS THE BLIND

"We don't say 'visually impaired' when someone's blind," Williams said. "Even if you do have some vision, if it is not reliable, then it is faulty. What's been proven is that what you can rely on is non-visual techniques. Those are methods that have to be practiced and mastered."

Staff at the EMERGE Center said that most people have good intentions toward the blind but are often clueless in how to act around them.

Williams said it wasn't long ago that it was an uphill battle to prove to authorities that someone who was blind could teach another blind person how to use skills effectively. It makes perfect sense to him. Who better to teach these skills than people who use them daily?

"There was a time when it was assumed that blind people couldn't work at all," Schroeder said. "Society assumes you're frail and need a lot of care. But we want you to think of yourself as being able to participate in what's a very demanding program."

The EMERGE Center congregates blind people in a way that most clients have never before experienced. For some, it could certainly be their first time meeting another blind individual, let alone an accomplished role model who's also blind, Schroeder said.

Advances in technology and remote work make it possible, now more than ever, for blind people to find opportunities that have historically been seen as impossible for them. It's just a matter of realizing how to get students up to speed for those tasks and confident in their own abilities, instructors said.

LIFE SKILLS

The program is built on four pillars of instruction: cane travel, home management, technology and braille. A specialized instructor accompanies each one of these pillars.

Williams teaches cane travel. He teaches how to find where the grass meets asphalt pavement,

how and when to stop at stop signs and traffic lights and when to ask for directions.

In hallways, he tells students how to be calm and not swing around their cane too far when and to go slowly on stairs. Making a mental map of their surroundings is key. He doesn't recommend counting steps in routes because it can be limiting in the long-run.

Home management centers on day-to-day living. By the end of the class, students will have learned how to cook 30 different meals. For the final, students will prepare a large meal for the EMERGE Center's whole staff — and clean the kitchen.

They'll also learn how to sort medication, complete and fold laundry, clean their living spaces and go shopping by themselves.

Lots of the skills learned in home management, instructor Renee Cornette said, can be applied to all parts of life. Learning to label one's kitchen drawers with braille stickers is also applicable to separating detergent from fabric softener.

It usually just takes longer to perform these tasks, Cornette said, but that's OK. The point is not to become a Michelin star chef, but to safely prepare sustainable meals.

That's how blind folks can avoid being burnt on the stove or by the oven. One should go slowly and

hover a hand over the surface. Using tools to probe food's consistency and setting timers is essential to not over or under cook a meal.

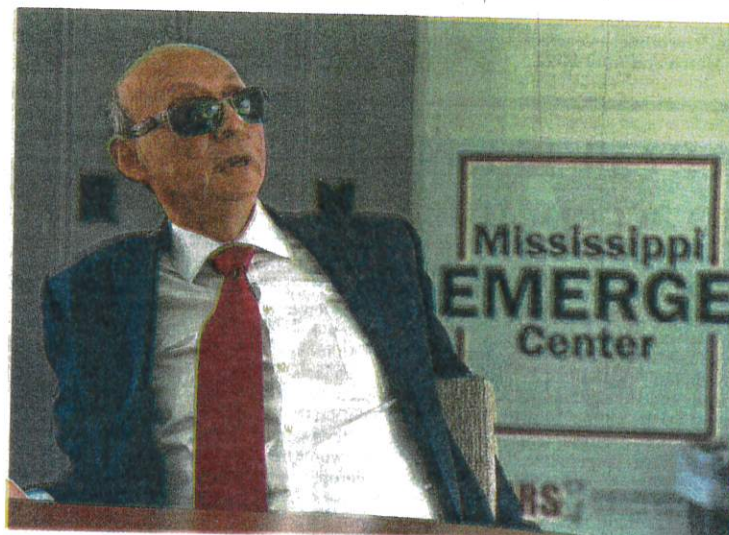
Cleaning the counter is a two-hand job. By using one hand to probe and another to wipe. Using a trash bin at the edge of the surface works wonders, Cornette said.

She explained that there are plenty of ways to go shopping while blind, one can ask store staff for help, use a scanning app on phone to tell her the expiration date of the product she's selected or a combination of skills to ensure she's picked the right goods.

Technology has come a long way for use by the blind, Williams explained. Most people gloss over the iPhone's voice over feature, Williams said, but that single handedly allows for fluid mobile phone usage for users who can't otherwise see the screen.

The technology class's room is equipped with computers loaded with software that voices over where the cursor hovers. They'll create PowerPoints and use email, imitating average office work. Computer monitors are never turned on. Students simply don't need them, he said.

The braille class is perhaps the most traditional or predictable. It teaches how to read in braille and use machines to produce braille writing and notes.



Dr. Fred Schroeder, a consultant for the Mississippi Emerge Center will help those who are blind become independent and confident on Thursday, July 25, 2024.

nail by itself."

LONG BEACH

Students live in housing provided by the program in an apartment community about 25 minutes away. Young said it's up to students to set their alarms, get themselves ready for the day and commute, via walking, to the EMERGE Center. The center is next door to St. Patrick's Church.

A specialist living at the apartment complex is on site in the event a student needs outside help with something.

There's no cafeteria on site. Food has to be prepared by the students in advance or ordered using a food delivery service app.

Long Beach was selected deliberately, Young said.

"We call them our family here," she said. "The community has been very receptive to us."

Young is trying to lobby for the municipal government to create sidewalks for the EMERGE Center's clients who currently have to walk on the edge of the street. Sometimes they totally and unknowingly block a lane of traffic, Williams said.

The EMERGE Center did communicate with the city and signs telling motorists to be mindful of the community's new blind residents have been installed on relevant routes.

The EMERGE Center currently has two students. It has a capacity for 15. Young said the Department of Rehabilitation Services handles prospective clients and has received many calls, so she's expecting the center will quickly reach capacity. It originally opened in early March. Day programs and programs for those nearing retirement are also offered, she said.

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