

Meet Mike Gosse, President at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland

Jim Ries: Hello, and welcome to Java with Jim. I'm Jim Ries, Director of Business Development at Offit Kurman. Joined here today with Mike Gosse, President at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland, otherwise known as BISM, as you can see on Mike's shirt.

Mike, nice to see you today. Thanks for joining us.

Mike Gosse: Thanks for having me, Jim. Appreciate the opportunity.

Jim Ries: Sure, our pleasure. So Mike, tell us about BISM. What do you do there and how do you serve the community around you?

Mike Gosse: Yeah, we've been in business since 1908 and obviously there's a lot of changes that have to happen to meet the needs of the blind community over the years.

Right now we are both an employer of blind people, largest employer of blind people in Maryland. We also train people in the skills of blindness. We have an independence training and rehabilitation department that covers everything from youth programs [00:01:00] all the way through seniors. And our big focus really is what we call our core program, which is for adults looking for a vocational outcome.

So we teach them all the skills, braille, cane travel, independent living, job readiness, technology, all those skills that are necessary to live independently, have a career, make money, have a family, all those things that we all wish to do. But at the same time, we're employing blind people and giving them those opportunities.

Unfortunately, the rest of the community just doesn't do, they just don't employ blind people. So that's how we ended up playing both roles. It's a great opportunity for us to be out in the community and get our name known more so that we can do a better job meeting people and finding ways we can help.

Jim Ries: Excellent. Thank you. Mike, when it comes to BISM, what would you say you're most proud of?

Mike Gosse: That's a great question. That's a [00:02:00] challenging question because I'm proud of our staff. And how involved they are at every level of the organization. Right now we're doing a real push to get blind people to advance in the organization, become part of the leadership, and we're making progress there.

I also have to say we're expanding our programs. Just this year we've been able to add significant programming for youth, both in the Baltimore area and across the state. And that's just so exciting to have an opportunity to bring in talented new teachers and having the state recognize what we're offering.

And giving us access to the resources to make it happen. So there's a lot going on here that's just exciting.

Jim Ries: Certainly a lot for you to be proud of, that's for sure. Mike, what will you and BISM be focused on in the next six months?

Mike Gosse: We're growth focused and [00:03:00] it's part of our strategic plan. But that comes in multiple areas.

Like I just said about growing our youth programs, but we also have an opportunity, I think, to grow our adult programs to reach more of the state wider reach within Maryland, we're really focused on Maryland. We have op we do things outside of the state, but we're focused in Maryland and we're focused on growth not only in providing more training to the community, but also more job opportunities.

And with job opportunities you have to have business opportunities. So we're looking at all those opportunities for growth.

Jim Ries: Got it. Mike, I'm gonna go off course for a minute because I know that you guys provide products for the community and beyond the community, and I feel like most people are unaware of that.

Can you get into that just a 30,000 foot view before we get onto our last question?

Mike Gosse: When I talk about us employing blind people, it's because we make things. Our biggest sector for employment is our textile industry, where we make [00:04:00] jackets for the military. We make the training uniforms for both the Air Force and the Space Force and the Army, and we make the Army Combat jacket.

So those are how we support our military and our fighting force. We also make office supply products and cleaning products. So we right here in our Baltimore plant, we make paper pads. We make copy paper. We have cleaning chemicals that we pour and make toilet paper, paper towels. It's all part of how we employ blind people.

Jim Ries: That's fantastic. Fantastic. All right, Mike, so last question. This is a fun one. What do most people watching this video not know about you?

Mike Gosse: About me personally or BISM? 'cause I'm

Jim Ries: you per, you personally,

Mike Gosse: I'm all about BISM.

Jim Ries: Well, you personally, you gotta be something.

Mike Gosse: Okay. And yeah, that is a tough one.

I've been blind all my life, and a lot of people don't realize that because I don't walk around with a cane and blindness comes in such a spectrum of I'm legally blind, I'm right at that [00:05:00]

line of legal blindness, and I live my life as a blind person, and I've lived in kind of both worlds. And what's the dichotomy of that is when people know I'm blind, they treat me differently.

Jim Ries: Mm-hmm.

Mike Gosse: And that's something that I think people don't understand how they react to blindness. And that's part of what BISM is all about, is changing how people feel about blindness. We would love to get to the point where somebody sees this video and they think, Hey I have an opening.

I'd like to see if a blind person can take that job. I worked my way up from being just an engineer to owning a company to then coming here and serving as the President, CEO of BISM and all as a blind person and all the things that I have to do to accommodate blindness in my life.

Every other blind person has to do as well. And some more so. Please, I hope your community understands that and that blind people have all the hopes and dreams and capacities that the sighted community [00:06:00] does.

Jim Ries: Well, Mike, thank you so much for sharing your story and the story of BISM and since 1908.

That's amazing. Really appreciate your time and I can't wait for the community to see and hear about what you guys are doing at BISM 'cause it's a great story.

Mike Gosse: I appreciate the opportunity to tell it. Thank you.

Jim Ries: You betcha. Thank you so much.