

GOOD WORKS

Special Olympians tie their shoes for good

Glen Burnie inventor gives 3,000 pairs of the stretchy Lock Laces to the athletes

By Mary Gail Hare
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Many Special Olympians competing in the national games this month in Lincoln, Neb., will have one less worry while they are running, jumping or playing ball: Their shoelaces will never come untied.

A Glen Burnie entrepreneur is donating 3,000 pairs of Lock Laces, a shoe-lacing system that features elastic laces combined with a spring-activated locking device.

Eric Jackson, 41, made the first pair for himself so he would not trip over loose laces while jogging. He soon had requests from friends and family and the basis for his own business. Now Jackson's laces are patented and his company is providing em-

are those making the product at Opportunity Builders Inc., which provides vocational training and employment services to nearly 400 adults with developmental disabilities, Jackson said.

"They are so easy to put on, and they make me feel safer," said Shawn Stephens, an OBI worker who uses Lock Laces. "It used to take me more than five minutes to tie each shoe. The best part of this is that I never have to tie them again."

OBI workers put together as many as 100,000 pairs of Lock Laces a month and package them for shipment around the world. They recently shipped 1,000 pairs to a sportswear retailer in England.

As Jackson's laces gain in popularity, they will provide more work at Opportunity Builders, said Leslie I.D. Prewitt, the company's director of external relations. She called the partnership between Jackson and the workers a win-win situation.

"This is providing vocational opportunity for so many adults with developmental disabilities that we serve," she said.

Jackson expects sales to exceed 250,000 pairs this year. Prewitt said she is certain that the OBI workers, who are the operational arm of Jackson's business, can handle any jump in sales.

"If orders increase, we can always enlist more help," she said. "We have the workers here to do it. We want other employers to know what we can provide and to bring more work to us."

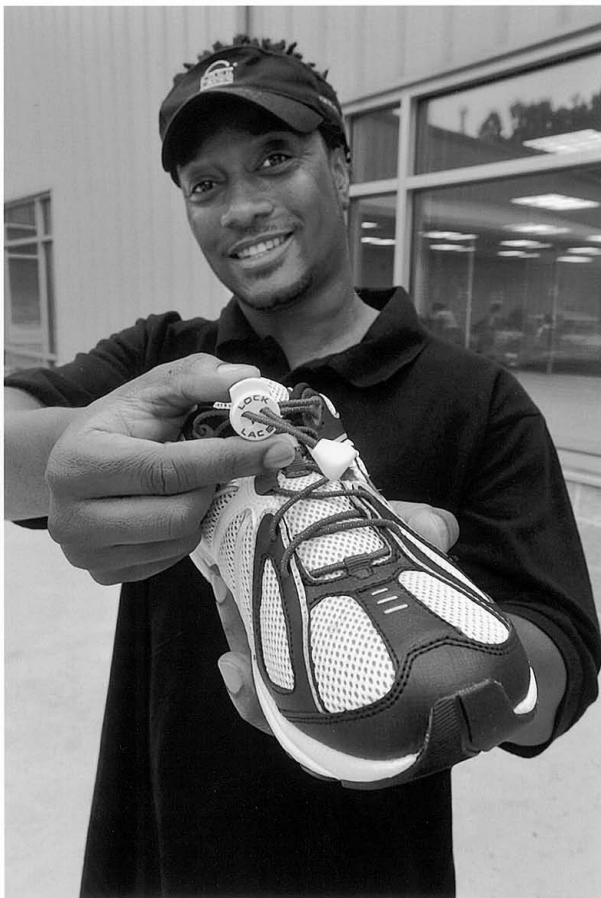
Louisa Eyler, mother of an autistic 9-year-old boy and recent volunteer "shoe tier" for the Maryland Special

Olympics games, said Lock Laces prevent injuries and embarrassment for the athletes.

"Loose laces can cause falls and broken bones," she said. "There is also the embarrassment of having to rely on others to tie your shoes. This product is so good for people with special needs."

Eyler is so convinced of the value of the product, she has volunteered to travel to Nebraska and lock laces at the national games, too. About 37 Maryland Special Olympians will compete on the national level, and they each have received a pair of the laces.

"By wearing the Lock Laces, our athletes become more independent," said Jason Schriml, vice president of competition



AMY DAVIS/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Eric Jackson, 41, of Glen Burnie, who invented Lock Laces, a plastic locking device that keeps elastic shoelaces tied, is supplying athletes at the Special Olympics with the laces.

and training for Special Olympics Maryland.

"Our athletes won't have to rely on outside support to tie their laces, allowing them to focus solely on their respective sports," he said. "This may seem like a small thing, but to understand this population is to know the profound impact it has

on their confidence and their ability to accomplish feats on their own."

Jackson said his donation amounts to nearly \$10,000 at wholesale costs, but it is a gift he willingly makes.

"This is a good cause, and it may help people with special needs," he said. mary.gail.hare@balt.sun.com



Louisa Eyler visits Opportunity Builders Inc., where workers Randy Jackson, left, and Jason Kouns put the laces together.

ployment for developmentally disabled adults at a workshop in Millersville. They are making Lock Laces — and wearing them, too.

"I created them for runners, but then realized what they could do for people with special needs," Jackson said. "You tie them once and never tie them again. They are guaranteed for the life of your shoe."

And, he added, the initial tie is a simple process that does not demand a lot of dexterity from the lacer. A lock that he describes as a push barrel keeps the knot in place and the wearer simply slips shoes on and off without tying or untying laces. The laces, which come in a dozen colors, sell for \$4.95 a pair.

Some of his most appreciative customers