Young opticians giving up time for eye charity

THE current economic climate means many university graduates are struggling to find work and pay off student loans, but a Birmingham pair are forfeiting a fifth of their salaries from their new jobs to devote time to charity work.

Every Monday newly-qualified opticians Sonia Aggarwal, aged 23 from Great Barr, and Harborne's Jaimin Chauhan, 27, will not be found at their hard-won jobs at leading High Street opticians, but will be offering free eye care at the Salvation Army's William Booth Centre, in Birmingham, on behalf of the Vision Care charity.

"I really wanted to do something rewarding for others with my profession and not just for myself," said Sonia, who graduated with a degree in Optometry from Bradford University last year.

"I believe that it is important to give back to others, so when I heard about Vision Care I just had to get involved."

Vision Care is the brainchild of Harinder Paul, a London-based optometrist who set up the charity just over five years ago.

"We found that there were many people with impaired eyesight who just cannot face going into an opticians' surgery," he explained. "So we set out to offer care from neutral venues."

Vision Care began its operations from a drop-in centre in London in September 2003, followed by another in the capital in 2005. "Our natural progression was to go to the next largest centre in the UK, which was Birmingham.

Glasses

"The Salvation Army was perfect for us in terms of location and because it works with people of all cultures."

One user of the centre said: "I've struggled with my eyes for about 12-15 years. Even though just before Christmas I couldn't clearly read a piece of paper in my hand, as an ex-squaddie I couldn't bear going into an opticians.

"I got my glasses a few weeks back and I've never felt better."

Another added: "My vision was seriously jumbled up. I don't trust opticians in the high street, but it was great to get the help here.

"Sonia and Jaimin are seriously nice and do great work for those in need."

Great Barr's Sonia Aggarwal with fellow Vision Care volunteer Jaimin Chauhan, from Harborne

Broadband speeds slow

BROADBAND speeds in Oldbury and Smethwick are some of the slowest in the West Midlands, a new survey has revealed.

Figures from online website comparebroadbanduk.com reveal that both boroughs fall well below the average speed.

The survey, which shows that Oldbury has an average speed of around 2.8mps and Smethwick with 3.2mps, was conducted from over 4,000 samples in three months last year.

Faster broadband speeds mean that web pages load much quicker than outdated dial-up services and that music and videos can be downloaded in a matter of minutes.

The average speed in the West Midlands is 4.82mps.

Army offering free fitness fun

A NEW type of keep fit class is being launched in West Bromwich, with the help of the British Army.

Army Fit is a free class that has been put together by the Army's fitness and nutrition experts after a survey revealed diet and fitness are likely to suffer significantly during the credit crunch.

Almost 200 people were interviewed across the Midlands in the lead up to the new year to gauge if feeling the pinch will result in gaining more than an inch.

The results revealed more than 78 per cent felt less financially secure than a year ago and, as a result, one fifth will be cancelling their gym membership.

The class, which is open to everyone, will be held at the Territorial Army (TA) Centre in Carters Green.

For more details call 0121 5531482 or visit www.armyfit.mod.uk

Officers in call over hate crime offences

POLICE across the West Midlands have launched a new campaign to encourage people to report hate crime.

The campaign comes as part of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGB&T) history month, and will see colourful postcards and posters distributed to bars, libraries and other public places encouraging people to report homophobic incidents to police.

Last year gay rights group Stonewall published a report which found that 77 per cent of victims do not report incidents.

Assistant Chief Constable Gary Cann said: "West Midlands Police will not tolerate individuals being targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"We want people to report hate crime to us. Only by working together will we tackle hate crime effectively."

Pc Jim Field-Evans, chairman of the force's Rainbow Network – the internal staff network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans employees – added: "Unfortunately, some people still target others because of who they are.

"I would encourage anyone who is a victim of hate to report the incident to police to help us catch offenders and bring them to justice."

Contact police officers on 0845 113 5000.