

Manufacturing program teaches skills to adults

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by Brian Johnson

BRISTOL — Educators, organizers, local manufacturers and learners involved in the Bristol Adult Education Center's manufacturing program all agree: the program is a win-win for everyone.

The three-month pilot program, supported by grants from several local organizations, began Sept. 30 and will end Dec. 18 at the Bristol Adult Education Center. Seven students, in the center's GED — General Education Diploma — credit diploma and English as a second language programs, studied a spring making, reading and math curriculum with teachers Karen Adrian and Melanie Semplice. This was supplemented with guidance counseling services provided by Debbie Pavlik and 54 hours of hands-on experience at workstations at Rowley Spring & Stamping. Three volunteers from Rowley, Andres Andrade, Terry Hick and Maxine Ouellette, supervised and instructed the students in use of CNC machines, setting up four slide machines and quality inspection. Upon completion of the course, students will receive National Workforce Read-iness Credentials.

Manufacturing

Kevin Bartram | Staff Retires Rowley Spring and Stamping worker Terry Hicks, right, trains Steven Corley, center, and Efrim Melendez as part of a program at the Bristol Adult Education Center on Tuesday. Students in the program get hands-on experience at Rowley Spring and Stamping.

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"It's a great opportunity to learn a trade that isn't offered as widely as it should be in my opinion," said Jodi, who declined to give her last name. "We've got awesome teachers and the training is great."

Josh Soto, who has spent 2 years and 5 months at St. Vincent DePaul Mission's homeless shelter at 419 West St., said the class has helped him improve his reading and math skills and has given him hope for a better future.

"The people here in class are like my family," he said. "I've learned a lot on the factory floor. The teachers have been very patient with us and very helpful, even if we don't get all the answers right. I love getting greasy and putting my hands on the machines, it is very gratifying. This is one of the only places that keeps me smiling and brings me peace."

"They are a great group, dedicated and committed," said Adrian. "Most haven't missed more than a day of class, and when they have it has been due to things like car problems."

Dennis Bouchard, facilities manager at Rowley, said students performed "much better than expected."

"They are motivated and willing to do whatever it takes to better themselves, which is exactly what we are looking for," he said. "It's a lot better to work with people who are interested in manufacturing than to spend two months training people only for them to realize that it's not for them."

"The commitment level is fantastic," said Larry Covino, supervisor of adult education. "Everyone here has other things in life taking up their time and they still come here four times a week and give it their all. We are thankful to the community organizations whose funds helped make this class possible, and will give us the opportunity to fund another class next year. We are promising 100 percent job placement for our students."

Covino said the average employee in the manufacturing industry is 50 years old. When those people retire in 10 years, that institutional knowledge will leave with them and there will be a high demand for skilled workers.

Hick, who instructed the students in use of four slide machines, came back to Rowley after his retirement to volunteer his expertise.

"It gives kids an opportunity to get into the trade," he said. "It also helps to dispel the illusion that manufacturing is dirty, grungy work when it is actually a highly skill-focused trade."

Jim Albert, president of the Central CT Chambers of Commerce, which helped fund the class, said he hoped the program grows to serve 100 students annually. "It's a tremendous win-win program," he said. "We hope to extend it to students from all walks of life, including returning vets, adult learners and young adults coming back from a year or two of college who didn't finish a 4-year diploma. This program will help them go into alternative career paths like manufacturing, construction, industrial production, precision engineering and the trades."

Sponsors include the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, The Main Street Community Foundation, The Time and Mary Walsh Charitable Fund at MSCF, The Central CT Chambers of Commerce, the New England Spring and Metalstamping Association, Walmart and the Farmington Bank Community Foundation.

Applicants must register for GED classes on January 5 or 7 at 9 a.m. or 6 p.m. Registration takes approximately three hours.