

SWWDB Update



A publication describing matters of interest regarding the services and programs of the Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board

SHORT-TERM TRAINING IS HIS ANSWER

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"It was the quickest three weeks of training I could imagine, because it was so enjoyable!" And for Bill Steckelmann, that enjoyable training led directly to employment in the Heavy Equipment operation field. He works 40 hours a week, every other week, with the Town of Koshkonong Public Works Department.

Having worked at GM for almost 29 years, the 63-year-old Steckelmann utilized the Dislocated Worker program to assist in his tuition and supportive expense payments. But it wasn't as easy as one might think. Bill first checked out a similar school in Sun Prairie but didn't feel it was the right choice for him. "When I contacted the North Country Heavy Equipment school in Escanaba, Michigan, I knew right away this was the place for me," he explained. "It was a personable, family-run business, and the training was excellent. It just gave me a positive feeling."



Bill Steckelmann is all smiles as he landed a job he really enjoys.

"My Case Workers (Julie Funk/Jodie Olson) at the Job Center really helped to overcome obstacles in certifying me to attend a school that was not in our area, but it worked out so well," he explained. "I can't say enough good things about how they helped me in this whole process."

Bill learned and tested on mainly six pieces of equipment—a half-week on each. Included were inspections, operations, maintenance, safety and similar topics. Those skills

tie in directly into what he does on the job, which includes operating a backhoe, asphalt roller, maintaining and patching roads, snowplowing, trimming vegetation, operating a chainsaw, and similar duties.

"I like the variety of my work, and it's great to be doing outdoor work after being indoors for almost 30 years," Bill said.

FROM ENGINEERING TECH TO ELECTRIC TECH

When Brad Hazen was working in the civil engineering industry for ten years from 1998-2008, the occupational outlook was fairly bright. Much of his work



Brad Hazen programs a robotic arm at Lancaster Machine and Tool

revolved around municipal engineering and perk testing for new houses being built. “We were averaging 250-300 tests and 10 to 15 projects a year up to 2008,” Brad said. Then the economy (and housing market) tanked, and Brad was laid off for three months. “We only did eight tests by the end of May and had no new engineering projects,” he said.

That’s when the 33-year-old rural Platteville resident realized it may be time for a career change. His boss suggested going back to school, and Brad concurred. In actuality, when he enrolled in the Electromechanical Technology program at Southwest Technical College it wasn’t a major change or new experience for him, as he had completed the Natural Resources program at Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton. “I initially wanted to work for the DNR, but there were no real full-time jobs available” he said. But the FVTC

program’s classes paid off in his initial job.

However, his second educational endeavor paid off even better, as he is now working full-time for Lancaster Machine and Tool Co. as an Electrical-Mechanical Technician at a salary higher than his initial job. He also has many company benefits. “I couldn’t have chosen a better field to go into. I’m really enjoying the work,” Brad said. His employer, company president Mark Schwab, is also pleased to have Brad working for him. “He knows the skills very well, has a wonderful personality, and an excellent work ethic,” Schwab said. He is wiring and writing program logic for control panels and automated fixtures.

Brad took advantage of the Dislocated Worker program to go back to school. “I actually felt more comfortable returning because first of all I was at a technical college, so I knew what to expect, and I was in the work force for ten years, which really helps,” he explained. Many of his general education credits transferred so he didn’t have to repeat them. “I really enjoyed school. It even allowed me a bit more time to get in some hunting and fishing,” he smiled. He graduated in May, 2010.

Plus his real world experience fit well with going back to school. “Everyone should have to work at least five years before going on to higher education,” he said. One of the reasons he chose the electromechanical field/program is because it is a higher-paying field, plus it has an excellent outlook for the future. “It takes time to learn all the aspects of this job. It’s challenging but also rewarding. I do something different every day and that makes this job very enjoyable,” he added.

Lancaster Machine and Tool provides custom machining, precision fabrication, mechanical design and engineering services, along with automated machinery.

FATHER, SON FOLLOW SAME PATH TO RE-EMPLOYMENT

When laid off foundry worker Travis Burrow saw the success his father Roger had utilizing the WIA Dislocated Worker program to re-train and obtain an excellent job, he decided to follow in his footsteps.

Roger, a Beloit native who is now 59 and living in Richland Center, returned to school two years ago following a layoff from Grede Foundries to upgrade his skills, and it has paid off with an excellent job as a maintenance operator at Rayovac. Spectrum Brands, a global consumer products company, has made Rayovac batteries at its Fennimore location the past 40 years.

“There’s no way I could’ve gone back to school without the assistance I received from the WIA program,” Roger said, even though it covered only a portion of his books, tuition, and travel costs, which included a 40-mile trip (one way) to school each day. He used a student loan to cover the remainder. “I can’t say enough good things about the help I received,” he added, “from the counselors to the case workers to the instructors—they were all very supportive.”

Roger made the Dean’s List all four semesters he attended Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, obtaining an Associate Degree in the Electro-Mechanical Technology program, which isn’t bad for someone who shied away from returning to school many years ago when the Beloit Corporation went bankrupt, costing him his foundry job.

Instead he relocated to Viola, WI where he drove truck until he returned to the foundry in Richland Center. That led to another layoff and Roger returned to driving truck for a co-op before returning to the foundry for Grede, which serviced the auto industry and where he worked for five months when the sour economy caused massive layoffs, sending those workers to the unemployment office.

It was then that Roger saw a sign as he went to the job center asking if he’d ever thought of returning to school. “I met with counselor Amber Culver, who conducted assessments of my job skills and interests, and I met with Karo Oates, and bam—within two weeks I was in school,” Roger said.

SCHOOL? NO FEAR!

The quickness of the entire experience didn’t allow time for Roger to build up a fear of going back to school. “In fact, I find that at this stage of my life it is easier to return...there’s not the pressure you might otherwise have,” he explained. He also indicated the excellent supportive services made a huge difference. “My instructors (Steve McCauley and Jason Kolbe) were truly outstanding and helped me to obtain my new job,” Roger said. “They challenge you, but also work with you to help you succeed.” He said it was his instructors who helped him locate his new job. “The school’s reputation and success rate allows you to be an in-demand graduate,” Roger said. He also lauded

counselor Tom Sheenah and Job Center counselor Kari Oates. “I can’t say enough good things about her—she was just fabulous.”

But Roger also said he needed to adjust his attitude a bit. “I was used to having things in a quick amount of time. It was an adjustment to pace myself. This was a marathon, not a 40-year dash.”

Travis’s experience was similar to his dad’s. He worked at the Richland Center Foundry in the core room and pouring iron for two years before being laid off in August, 2009. “My dad’s decision and success definitely influenced my decision,” Travis said. He’s received similar support from WIA, but with a wife and five children to support, times are tough. He has a good start, though, having completed a couple of semesters in the two-year program. “It’s tough balancing school and family, but I know I can do this,” Travis said.

In Roger’s case, he actually wound up better off. He’s now making more per hour at Spectrum than he did at Grede and he has full benefits. And the Spectrum job is not as physically demanding as that of a cleaning room worker (grinding, core removal, etc.).

Travis is hoping that his results will be as successful as his father’s. “I’m proud of what my dad has done and I’m hoping I can follow through as well as he did,” Travis said.



Travis Burrow, left, and his father Roger

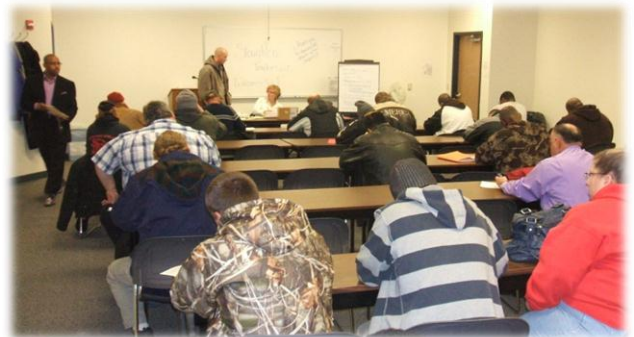
JOB FAIRS DRAW CROWDS

Some recent Job Fairs, held at the Rock County Job Center, may be indicating that the economy might be turning in the right direction. In the photos to the right, literally hundreds of potential employees are screened and interviewed by Stoughton Trailers for anticipated job openings (in Brodhead and Stoughton) at that

company. While it was the first such job fair in quite some time at the Job Center, since this January 12 event several other job fairs have also been held.

With more than 7,000 Rock County residents unemployed and over 500 filing initial unemployment claims in the first week of February, the crisis is far from over, but at least some local companies are looking to add workers.

In the top photo (right), workers who have completed their applications wait for an interview. In the second photo, those interested in being hired are filling out applications, while in the bottom photo, the Job Center's Resource Room was handling large numbers of those desiring to upgrade their resumes, write cover letters, or browse for other job possibilities.



VETS TREAT ROCK COUNTY JOB CENTER STAFF—

In a show of appreciation for their support and hard work, the staff members of the Veterans Office at the Rock County Job Center treated over 120 Job Center staff to a 'Pre-Thanksgiving Meal' on November 23, 2010. Included were chicken breast, raisin dressing, potatoes, veggies, and all of the traditional trimmings. Both Dale Belke and Charles Jones (organizers of the event), Veterans Services Officers, assisted in serving as staff went through the line. All staff members expressed their appreciation for this benevolent gesture on the part of the Veterans staff.



SHE HANDLES OLDER WORKERS IN PROGRAM SHE WAS ONCE IN

As one her duties, SWWDB Finance Assistant Jean Prochaska processes payroll sheets for older workers in the WISE program. Ten years ago, she would've been processing her own time sheet as she herself took advantage of the program to gain entrance into the workforce.

"Now it's titled the WISE program (Wisconsin Senior Employment Program). Back then (when Jean was 59), it was titled Older Worker Program," Jean explained. "I guess they didn't want us to feel too old," the 69-year-old farm wife smiled. She was hired into the program the day after Labor Day exactly ten years ago filling in with the work of 'Tent City' at the Farm Progress Days through the University of Wisconsin Extension office after a college intern backed out," she said. She then saw an ad in the paper for an Older Worker program and she qualified. "I worked at the Iowa County Job Center at the front desk in the Resource Room," she explained, saying she learned how to do job search, preparing a resume, and finally going out on job interviews 'that had vastly changed since I was single.' She also learned how to operate many different office machines. The WISE program provides useful part-time employment to persons who have a need, have limited employment prospects, and are 55 or older.

Prior to that she was raising her children and helping her husband raise beef and hogs on their farm near Montfort. She handled much of the paperwork and financial matters but it was all manually done. When she went back to work, she had to learn her computer skills from scratch. The WISE program sent her to school to learn those skills plus she completed several classes at the old 'Job Center' in Platteville and when she was hired into the SWWDB financial office, she completed three classes at Southwest Wisconsin Technical College. "Plus the people in the office here have been fantastic," Jean added. "They don't laugh at me or belittle me when I ask questions, and they have outstanding patience with me."

JEAN HAS VARIED BACKGROUND

Originally from the Milwaukee suburb of Greenfield (her parents were among the original settlers of the village), Jean worked a brief period at the State Board of Health, in the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Madison prior to her marriage. They moved to Fennimore, with her husband working in construction and farming part-time before going into farming full-time. After her four children were married, she and her husband bought 40 acres and just raised hogs. "When my sister went to the store and bought a ham that cost more than what we got for the entire 250 pound hog (prices for the entire hog were at nine-and-a-half cents a pound then), we

realized that the future in hog farming was pretty dim," Jean said.

But another life-altering situation occurred shortly thereafter. Jean left the Older Worker program when her husband, Ervin, suffered a serious medical condition, taking care of the farm chores. At the time, she was working 20 hours a week as an Older Worker and 20 hours a week in the Finance Office. She quit working in the Older Worker Program and did just the hours in the Finance Office. She was later hired by the SWWDB at 32 hours a week with benefits, where she has been ever since these past 10 years.

She now works an average of 24 hours a week. "It varies, depending upon the work load, but I'm trying to keep it to about 24 hours a week," Jean explained. She says she and Ervin, who is doing well now, want more time to do things together, especially with the nine grandchildren.

"I love what I'm doing and have great people to work with," Jean said. Annette Meudt, Finance Director, was her supervisor when she started at the SWWDB and continues to be this day. "Jean is a wonderful worker and someone who has ably learned skills on the computer from the ground up," Annette said. Jean's philosophy with her computer skills is simple—"Use them or lose them," she said. And according to Annette, Jean uses them very well! "She's an indispensable part of our team—we're very fortunate to have her with us," Annette added.



"I love what I'm doing and have great people to work with."

---Jean Prochaska

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We're on the Web!

See us at:
www.swwdb.org

**SWWDB WELCOMES
NEW MEMBERS,
HONORS DR. KNOX**

Three new SWWDB Board members were welcomed at their December 8 meeting, while outgoing Board member Dr. Karen Knox was recognized by Board Chair Scott Stocker for her dedicated and distinguished service to the Board. New members, being flanked by Board Chair Scott Stocker (left) and SWWDB Executive Director Dr. Robert Borremans (right) are (l to r): Mark Masters, President of Masters Farms, Janalyn Niemeier, Senior Employment Services Specialist, Lands End, and Dr. Tom Eckert, BTC President. The Meeting was held at Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen in Mineral Point.



About the SWWDB...

The Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board (SWWDB) serves a six-county area in the Southwest corner of Wisconsin. We are a dynamic collaboration of private and public leaders

working together to promote innovation and quality in local workforce development activities.

The Board meets on a quarterly schedule to address workforce development issues and

provide oversight to the eight Southwest Job Center offices located in the area. Committee members meet on an as-needed basis to provide guidance and direction on topical issues.

SWWDB PARTICIPATES IN BMHS CAREER FAIR

The SWWDB participates in numerous community activities such as business and marketing expos, job fairs, and career fairs. At the right, SWWDB Business and Employer Services Manager Eric Kuznacic encourages Beloit Memorial High School students to gather information regarding jobs available, education necessary for certain jobs, and related information as a part of the Career Fair held at BMHS on November 17, 2010.

