

## 'Amazing experience'

### CNC grad pleased with new program

By RICHIE DAVIS Recorder Staff December 7, 2013

SOUTH DEERFIELD — Dana Graves was beaming as he headed to his last Middle Skills Academy metal-working class. He had just been offered a full-time job as a machinist at Valley Steel Stamp Co.

"It's been an amazing experience," said Graves, one of five members of the first group of prospective workers to take the 12-week course. He was speaking at a **Franklin-Hampshire Regional Employment Board annual legislative breakfast Thursday**. A 2005 Greenfield High school graduate who'd been repeatedly laid off as a sheet-metal worker — and who became the father of twins a year ago, will be among 15 people graduating from the program next week with upgraded 21st-century skills.

"I needed a more consistent paycheck, and my father had been a machinist for 30 years at Deerfield Plastics," said Graves. "I love Greenfield, but there was never a job I found in Greenfield that can give you a paycheck you can live on, until I found these CNC (computer-controlled metal-working machine) shops that I never knew existed."

But when Graves, who had taken a class in machining at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, applied at Valley Steel Stamp, he was told he needed more training. It was his grandmother — "one of these people who always keeps up with the news" — who first told him about the Middle Skills Academy, started this year with help from Valley Steel President Steve Capshaw and other businesses who contributed \$213,000 to upgrade training equipment at Franklin County Technical School, matched by \$250,000 from the state, with another \$239,000 to train unemployed and under-employed workers needing the additional skills.

Graves, who said tolerances of half an inch were fine in sheet-metal work, praised the new precision equipment he's been working within eight hour shifts at work, followed by five-hour classes.

"I ate, slept and drank machining," said Graves, one of five of the program's graduates who has already been offered a job or an internship. "To take one inch and split that to 10,000 parts, and then to be able to hold the part within two of those lines, and to think that whatever part you make is going to be floating in space above you, has a certain feeling of accomplishment. It amazes me. I just feel like literally the sky's the limit right now."

Employment board members and legislators also heard from school-to-career participants like Luke Toritto, who did a one-day job shadowing at Northeast Solar while a Greenfield High School senior last year and is now studying building construction technology at UMass.

The gathering also provided an opportunity for the board to ask area legislators for help in increasing funding for one-stop career centers, which has been stuck at about \$4.9 million for the past three years and provides \$150,000 to the employment board to operate its three career centers Greenfield, Northampton and Orange and help nearly 6,800 people a year in job readiness, training, job

counseling and making connections with employers. While federal funding is focused on specific targeted populations, the state money helps provide a broad range of programs throughout the 50-town region, said board member Maureen Carney, who asked members of the area legislative delegation to fight for at least \$56 million in funding in the coming year's budget.

Board members asked for legislators to increase the funding level for School to Career programs, which has been stuck at \$100,000 for this region and is needed to help connect young people with employers throughout the 1,400-square-mile region for internships and job shadowing programs. The money is used, in part, to pay for a Youth Pathways coordinator at the Greenfield Career Center who works with schools to connect students with internships, job and career path counseling.

Board member Jim Ayers also urged the legislators to support a provision in welfare reform proposals now in conference committee that would provide \$11 million for education and training as well as transportation and child care to help support former welfare recipients to find and keep jobs.

The legislators present, including Reps. Paul Mark, D-Peru, and Denise Andrews, D-Orange, indicated they agreed with those objectives.

"There's a perception out there among some people," said Rep. Peter Kocot, D-Northampton, "that families and individuals getting food stamps, welfare benefits and help from the programs that you are talking about today shouldn't get them, that somehow people who are poor are scam artists, that some of them are criminals and should not get those tax-based programs that help them be successful. Many of us fight that battle every day to make sure that families get help, that individuals get help, and I want to thank you for being on the front lines of that battle."

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