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Nathan Beauregard and Dana Graves, holding twins Zoey and Ava, all of Greenfield, are members of the first graduating class of the Franklin Hampshire Middle Skills Manufacturing Initiative. The graduation ceremony was held at the Franklin County Technical School on Tuesday evening.

15 graduate in first class of advanced manufacturing training program

By CHRIS SHORES Recorder Staff – December 10, 2013

TURNERS FALLS — In his seven years working as a machinist for the Athol-based L.S. Starrett Co., 48-year-old Orange resident Robert Donnelly has witnessed a manufacturing industry that's abandoning manual machines and relying more on computer programming to power production.

Now, after completing the inaugural 11-week, 220-hour Middle Skills Manufacturing Initiative training program — a partnership between local manufacturing businesses, the Franklin County Technical School, Greenfield Community College and the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board — Donnelly feels confident he can take on new duties at work and is even thinking of starting his own contracting business on the side.

Fifteen men from across western Massachusetts graduated from the program Tuesday and will enter a local workforce that desperately needs trained labor. Manufacturers have said they have had to turn away 90 percent of potential work because they lacked qualified employees.

"I can't tell you what I feel like knowing that I have a group of people here that are skilled, they've been primed and they're ready to hire," said Cody Sisson, CEO of Sisson Engineering Corp. in Northfield. "That hasn't happened to me in decades."

The program's first graduation was held at the Tech School — nearly one year after Greenfield business owner Steven Capshaw announced plans to raise \$500,000 to buy new advanced manufacturing machines for that

school.

His efforts “triggered a chain reaction,” said Sisson, that ultimately brought over \$800,000 to Franklin County from public and private sources. The Tech School’s machine shop was completely refurbished and Greenfield Community College began to develop an advanced manufacturing curriculum targeted at unemployed and underemployed workers in the local community.

A total of 93 applicants applied to be in the program’s first cohort, and the regional employment board whittled that group down to 15. A state grant is paying for three more classes of that size to go through the training for free, with the next session starting in February.

As pleased as organizers were on Tuesday, they also acknowledged their work has just begun. Five of the graduates have already secured jobs but the regional employment board will be looking to help the other 10 find positions.

Organizers want to see women well represented in future classes.

And the project-based curriculum, which was taught by 11 individuals, could be smoothed out in future runs, said educators, who said they were constantly adjusting pieces as the weeks progressed.

Local state representatives Denise Andrews, D-Orange, and Paul Mark, D-Peru, were among the attendees at Tuesday’s graduation.

“You make the difference in people’s lives. Never forget that,” said Andrews.