

**Greenfield Recorder: December 12, 2014**

## **14 equipped for machining jobs**

### **Third class to graduate with valuable manufacturing skills**

**By CHRIS CURTIS Recorder Staff**

TURNERS FALLS — On Wednesday night, hours after classes ended, the Franklin County Technical School machine shop was busy with adult students preparing their final projects.

Fourteen are set to graduate today, the third class through the Middle Skills Manufacturing Initiative.

Leaning into the shielded compartment of a lathe to change out the collection of drill bits, blades and other tools in the computer-controlled machine, Davonte Williams, 23, of Illinois said he moved to the area to study mechanical engineering or music.

“I was actually supposed to attend GCC, but I’m an out-of-state student, so I was unable to pay for tuition,” Williams said. Then the machining course came up and it was free. Now he has a temp job doing inventory work in a shop, not in the shop proper because he didn’t have the experience, but he said it gets him in the door.

On the nearby bank of simulators, Greenfield residents Jim Bitzer, 51, and Kody Stevens, 20, double-checked the codes they had written to produce the final project, a metal cylinder with no real purpose but a collection of skill-testing complications.

Stevens, a 2012 Franklin Tech welding graduate, has landed a job in the mold department of Pelican Products in South Deerfield through the program, after an unsuccessful job search.

“Unemployed, I didn’t have any luck finding a decent job. My previous employer was Lamson & Goodnow, and you know how that went down,” Stevens said.

Bitzer, who said he worked for 23 years in printing, said he had already had a couple of interviews and has another Monday with a temp agency.

The adult machine technology training program at Franklin County Technical School began in 2013 after local manufacturers desperate for workers trained in computerized machining donated about \$215,000 and successfully lobbied the state for \$250,000 more; enough to refurbish the technical school’s outdated shop with 14 new machines. With money from a state grant, the Franklin-Hampshire Regional Employment Board began administering a program for adults — taking advantage of the after-school evening hours when the new shop would otherwise sit idle.

With the current class graduating, the Middle Skills program will spend the last of its current state grant training a fourth class in February, but money is falling into line from other sources to keep the evening classes grinding.

The first \$213,751 from a state Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund grant will run out after the fourth session, but Employment Board Executive Director Patricia Crosby said that Greenfield Community College has money from a federal grant to run the shop and classroom portion of the program, but the training doesn’t exist in a vacuum. “What we are hoping to get continued resources for and we will be hearing any day, is everything that surrounds that,” Crosby said, particularly funding for the Employment Board project coordinator, Michael Baines. Baines manages the project and serves as career coach and recruiter.

Crosby also spoke of expanding training for the industry to include basic training to precede the CNC training

for candidates who aren't prepared and possible follow-up programs.



**Jim Bitzer, foreground, and Kody Stevens double check coding on simulators in the Franklin County Technical School machine shop Wednesday night. The two are among a graduating class of 14 from the third session of the Middle Skills training initiative, an evening class preparing adults for careers in machining.**

Recorder/Chris Curtis

The program began a little rough around the edges, but has polished up nicely, according to Baines.

“The first training was pretty rough because we had new equipment. We were still getting some of it wired up; we still didn’t have a lot of tooling in place. Over time that’s all been in place,” Baines said. “We went from one teacher per class to two teachers, which was immensely effective. The curriculum has been reworked. Those are some significant things.”

### **Now recruiting**

The program is now recruiting for the fourth session, to begin in February with the 12-week program growing from four days per week to five.

The Employment Board will hold a manufacturing careers information session Jan. 12. Those interested can call 413-774-4361 for reservations.

Jocelyn Croft, Franklin Tech vocational curriculum director, said the parallel programs are thriving. The machining industry needs trained employees, and with the old internal apprenticeship approach fading, industry is looking for another avenue, Croft said, and for the time being, that’s the high school and adult education programs.

“If you get jobs like this you get the kind of money where whatever the housing is here you’re going to be able to afford it,” Croft said, referencing the reported lack of affordable housing in the area.

Croft said the Tech machine program was dying out until the businesses re-equipped it. The traditionally male-dominated program is also attracting more female students now that the job looks less like heavy industry and more like design work, Croft said. The sophomore class, which chose their shops the first year with the new machines, has 13 students enrolled, the shop capacity, she said.

Baines said of the program’s 29 graduates and the 14 set to graduate today, 28 are working in the industry at last

count, including five in the latest class.

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