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GCC precision machining program offers training for a new career

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Friday, August 03, 2018

Changing careers midstream is rarely a pleasure cruise, especially after a layoff from a management position and a 12-year career.

For John Hannum of Whately, who'd shown strengths in math, physics and woodshop by the time he graduated Frontier Regional School and began studying engineering at the University of Massachusetts Amherst before spending nine years in the Army Reserve National Guard, the skills he learned in light infantry and as a heavy anti-armor specialist came in handy.

His mechanical ability, methodical approach and patience under pressure as he learned how to reassemble all sorts of weapons under combat conditions — from 50-caliber machine guns to Dragon Missile Systems — not only proved handy when planning his next career, they were the key to his decision to become a precision machinist.

"I've always been interested in working with computers," Hannum said. "And I've always had an aptitude for building things."

Even working in management at Home Depot, Hannum designed and built projects, from basic woodworking to more advanced decks, doors, windows and custom projects for customers.

The question was how to get the training needed for his new career, particularly when he was out of a job.

Then he learned about the Manufacturing Skills Initiative, an advanced manufacturing training partnership linking instruction at Greenfield Community College, career coaching and job placement from the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board and the Franklin Hampshire Career Center, a new state-of-the-art machine shop at Franklin County Technical School as well as area precision manufacturers eager to hire and train new machinists.

It offers a 12-week evening training in computer numerical control machining in Greenfield and Turners Falls that's designed for career changers and unemployed and underemployed adults. An information and application session is planned for Monday at 3 p.m. at the career center at 1 Arch Place in Greenfield. Call to register at 413-774-4361 or www.gcc.mass.edu/manufacturing.

Hannum found state and federal job training grants to pay for the 16 weeks of training: a four-week program at GCC, learning to read blueprints, use measuring tools and study lean manufacturing techniques while refreshing his manufacturing math, followed by eight weeks of CNC training at the tech school.

After polishing his résumé, he attended a job fair where he got two job offers. Hannum — who'd graduated as a CNC operator in May 2017 — selected Bete Fog Nozzle, a family-owned manufacturer of spray nozzles used by fire protection, pollution control, drilling and craft brewery and winery industries.

"I was impressed by the company's values and their investment in training and keeping their workers," said Hannum. "And by the products I was going to make. The nozzles are made from scratch — first by metal casting on one side of the shop and then machining and threading them to finish and final product testing on the other."

Hannum started on the third shift of the 155-employee company, but moved quickly to a first-shift lathe machinist job after eight months.

A dozen of the 14 students in his CNC program sought and found employment after their training alongside Hannum at Bete, at L.S. Starrett in Athol, and in Ludlow, Keene, N.H., and Brattleboro, Vt.

The 12-week CNC training, which has graduated more than 130 students over five years with an 85 percent placement rate, "was the transition I needed to make a successful career change," Hannum said.

Bete President Tom Fitch said, "It's a real challenge to find skilled machinists. This type of program is important to us. We like to find smart people who like to work in a collaborative environment and are really good with their hands, and John fits that to a T.

"We're fortunate in this area because we've got a long history with the tap and die and machine industries over time, but it's just not the same as it was before."

Bete works to support the tech school, "as well as this program which helps people with transitions. This allows them to see if it's something they really want to do (and) to train for a job at a livable wage, coming out with starting offers above \$15 an hour."

On the Web: www.gcc.mass.edu/manufacturing