

College and high school partner on trade education

HEATHER HILL
THE MID-COUNTY MEMO

Guy Crawford, vice president of operations for the Northwest College of Construction and also a member of the Parkrose School Board, has more than these schools' interests at heart while advocating focused and intensive introductory vocational training at the high school level.

"When I was a senior in high school, I took a welding class," he said. "Later, when I got out of the (military) service, the only marketable skill I had was welding."

He exemplifies that electives can provide a lifeline. "Parkrose School District didn't have any (formal) vocational training (until this year), and this is a blue-collar neighborhood."

Thanks to Crawford's successful networking as well as to NWCC President Dan Graham and PSD Superintendent Karen Fischer Gray, the college launched a partnership program with Parkrose this year, extending the use of its facilities to provide hands-on instruction to high school students interested in the construction trades.

Itself a relatively young institution, NWCC, 8111 N.E. Holman St., was founded in 2005 to provide apprenticeship and construction management programs in the fields of carpentry, concrete finishing, labor, heavy equipment, HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning), masonry, sheet metal, tile finishing and welding.

"The vision for the college was that we would be able to offer education and training to anyone in the construction industry, from entry level to ownership of a company," Graham said.

Evolved from the apprenticeship programs administered by the Associated General Contractors and the Pacific Northwest chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, NWCC provides a unique advantage for craftspeople still unsure where their talents and interests will find the best fit. Graham noted that while other programs only accept registered apprentices for very specific trades, NWCC not only offers a variety of skills training, "we are open to the public, so a non-apprentice, somebody who just wants to learn carpentry, will be sitting side-by-side with apprentices. It really opens it up to the community."

The high school program, piloted with a welding class last year, is simply an extension of the school's founding vision and goals.

"We administer more apprentice programs in the state of Oregon than anyone else," Graham said. "There isn't anybody else who administers multiple programs quite like this. It gives us a good basis to provide

kids at the high school level, who just need an introduction because they are still making up their minds whether they want to do it at all. They can experiment, and we can provide an introduction to all of those trades, and they can make their own decisions about their careers."

Please see PARKROSE, Page 10



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NWCC's Vice President of Operations and Parkrose School Board member Guy Crawford helps spark interest in vocational studies, shown here with the Memo's Heather Hill.



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Parkrose High School students attend hands-on college

Continued from Page 2

While general education establishes the knowledge base for numerous applications, electives traditionally serve as windows into more specialized fields. As budget cuts sacrifice what some consider unessential electives, the industries affected have explored other ways to introduce non-college track career options to youth. Of late, charter schools have answered this call. In the case of the construction trades, the ACE (Architecture, Construction and Engineering) Academy charter school — where Graham serves as a board member, and where he first worked with Fischer Gray — was designed as a career-track school for middle and high school students interested in architecture, construction or engineering.

Though a proponent of the charter school, Graham observed, “ACE is turning out to be a pretty high bar for kids to function at that level.” While ACE may prove a great head start for the focused, its career-intensive study may also intimidate prospective shop class students. NWCC believes that its facility presents a more accessible opportunity for the simply curious to explore their interests.

The college’s proximity, availability and facilities also credit it. “Because 70 percent of our training

happens in the evening, we have a lot of capacity here during the daytime,” Graham said. “It has always been our vision that we would have high school kids here.”

Crawford added, “It is hideously expensive (for high schools) to create staff, equipment and a lab. Meanwhile our labs are sitting empty.”

Halfway through the Parkrose partnership’s first year, Graham and Crawford report favorable feedback, no problems. “Nothing other than the usual boneheaded behavior that you would expect from teenagers,” Crawford said, adding, “but they’re pretty good kids.”

Whittled down from 65 applicants to 15 by Parkrose counselors, students are

bussed the 10 minutes from Parkrose High School every other day to take part in the 90-minute class. The first half of the year, students learned the basics of welding, both in the classroom (using nationally accredited apprenticeship texts. “It’s a standardized national curriculum that we use for adults, but they just use the very entry-level part of it,” Graham said) and later in the lab where sparks fly.

Welding instructor Kym Halstead teaches all NWCC’s adult welding classes and works with the teens too. “The kids love our instructor,” Crawford said, “Kym does a very good job.” It helps that she has a teenager at home.

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— DAN GRAHAM,
NORTHWEST COLLEGE OF CONSTRUCTION PRESIDENT

NWCC employs over 40 instructors, but as Graham pointed out, “Not all of those will be available for the kids; we handpick who we want to teach the kids based on their interest and

Please see NW COLLEGE, Page 11

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NWCC’s Vice President of Operations and Parkrose School Board member Guy Crawford helps sophomore Joshua Green in welding lab.

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NW College of Construction opens its labs to Parkrose students

Continued from Page 10

abilities. It is different than teaching adults, so (they) have to adjust.”

The welding lab consists of a central worktable and small individual stalls, separated by dark curtains of heavy plastic. It only accommodates a maximum of eight students at once. While half of the students wield torches behind visors, making boxes, learning the dexterity of different welds and eventually, as a final project, producing a stool, the other half attends a classroom session of welding fundamentals taught by Scott Ryan. Depending on the day’s projects, assignments and schedule, the two groups usually attend each class for 45 minutes.

In February, the students will transition from welding to an introduction of various construction education studies, including carpentry, heavy equipment, masonry trades, concrete and instruction in tile flooring installation. “Heavy equipment is the sexiest program,” Crawford quipped.

“These kids are not going to be on heavy equipment,” Graham clarified. “We have two really cool simulators with 52-inch screens similar to what pilots train on, and they have very sophisticated software and controls,” just like the back hoes and excavators they replicate. “It is pretty cool; if you don’t do it right, you run the bucket into the truck and it goes bang; kids get off on it.” Granted a trial run, this reporter agrees with that assessment.

PSD initially broached NWCC to provide training for freshman and sophomore ACE Academy candidates, but the district now acknowledges that the program may fill a niche for older students looking for something more experimental and less career focused than ACE Academy’s curriculum. Yet, it will still disappoint kids hoping to skirt academic rigor. Though not a fully functional charter school like

ACE, NWCC’s program still instructs in construction-necessary math, and students are required to pass written tests in addition to demonstrating comprehension in the lab.

“It is academically challenging,” Graham said, “which has come as a surprise to some of the students who thought they were going to be able to come and play in our labs.”

As the NWCC/PSD partnership enters the second half of its pilot year, discussions are afoot for further expansion, taking the program from one class of 15 students to four such classes running concurrently throughout the school year, but that vision — as everything in the public school curriculum — is vulnerable to budget strictures. Funding for the pilot program came from donations vested by the PSD, the AGC Foundation and federal training money provided through Work Systems, Inc. Next year’s program would be folded entirely into PSD’s budget.

For now, Parkrose remains NWCC’s only partner public school district. While the college’s invitation has stoked the interest of Portland Public Schools, especially Roosevelt High School, Parkrose has demonstrated both the need and initiative to enlist.

In the meantime, NWCC will continue to grow its management programs and adult education

classes that this spring will include welding, deck building, inside and outside painting, and sustainable gardening. But the high school collaboration fulfills a more personal goal.

“I totally identify with these boys because I couldn’t pay attention to save my life (when I was that age),” Crawford said. “But if you got me busy doing something, then I could do that all day long and learn in the process. We definitely want girls in there; we have four, and we hope to have a lot of

girls in the future, but we know from personal experience that you have to keep boys active or they become a problem.”

Some may be one welding class away from their future in the construction trades. ■



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Parkrose High School sophomore Joshua Green practices the art of melting metal in the Northwest College of Construction’s welding lab, with instruction from Guy Crawford.

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Clarification

The November issue of the Memo included a business memo showcasing DAD Home Repairs. That item indicated that the company is licensed, bonded and insured. It turns out that there is no contractor license on record for this business with the state of Oregon. Vio Davidyan can do pressure washing and a variety of handyman chores without a contractor’s license. He refers customers to licensed, bonded and insured building and electrical contractors for work beyond his purview. We regret the mischaracterization and encourage our readers to check with the state before hiring any contractor; here’s how: Oregon Construction Contractors Board 700 Summer St. NE, Suite 300 P.O. Box 14140 Salem, OR 97309-5052 Phone: 503-378-4621 Fax: 503-373-2007 e-mail: ccb.info@state.or.us Website: www.oregon.gov/CCB/

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