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## ABCs of craftsmanship

By GARY PULEO



EAST NORRITON — An alarming shortage of high school graduates seeking skilled jobs in the construction world is a major threat to the industry.

But there's no slim pickings when it comes to reasons for the lack of workers waiting to accede to the helm when the current generation retires, according to Jeff Zeh, president of the Southeast Pennsylvania Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors, Inc.

"Parents and various school administrators and guidance counselors are focused on having everybody go to college, and obviously college isn't for everyone," Zeh noted. "We need to work on these two issues to convince people that there is a viable opportunity. The other important part of that is that you can't ship construction jobs overseas."

Compounding the problem is the grimy stereotype, he added.

"A lot of kids think you'll be pounding nails and digging ditches for the rest of your life and the truth of the matter is that in today's construction industry, jobs are very sophisticated, to begin with. You may start out doing some labor-intensive functions, but as you move up and get more skills you move into being a project manager, a superintendent, part of senior management ... or you can own your own business. There are so many options."

The increasing technology embraced by the construction industry demands math and computer skills and other credentials that workers didn't need before, Zeh pointed out.

Nationally, ABC represents over 23,000 contractors, subcontractors and suppliers.

The East Norriton-based chapter has been focusing on apprenticeship training and management education since 1982, when it began offering evening classes in various vocational schools throughout the region.

But now, with the opening of its new Apprenticeship and Craft Training Facility in Kulpsville, the company expects to combat the dilemma more fiercely than ever before.

"It's perhaps the most significant project we've undertaken since I've been here, which is more than eight years," Zeh said.

"The future of our industry is predicated on our ability to attract young people, train them and have them go to work as craft professionals. The single biggest challenge confronting our members is getting skilled craft professionals into the workforce."

Out of necessity, the training program has evolved from exclusively offering night classes to daytime education, Zeh allowed.

“It’s the first ABC program in the country to do that, and as we did that we had a greater demand for our own space, so that was a big driving force in this building project, which has been in development for about five years.”

The 1500 Gehman Road, Kulpsville, location was an ideal spot for the school due to its easy availability, he noted.

“Kulpsville is centrally located in terms of our students in the five-county area. It’s right off the Northeast extension of the turnpike, convenient for everyone to get to.”

Fees for the two-semester, weekly classes range from \$1800 to \$2,000 for the only state- and federally-approved program currently available.

“Most attendees are employees of ABC members, but enrollment is open to the general public,” Zeh said. “We’ll get somebody just out of the military or from work force development every once in a while and they can also be considered for employment by an ABC member.”

Steve Stoughton, of the ABC-affiliated Worth and Company in Pipersville, Bucks County, said that Worth has enrolled 100 employees in ABC’s program.

“We’re a mechanical contractor — our guys are focused on plumbing, pipe fitting and sheet metal,” he noted. “Basically, what the training does is improve the skills beyond the field experience and brings it into the classroom. It helps us to continually improve what we’re delivering as a final product, by investing in a training program for our employees.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity for anybody that would be interested in getting into the trades, whether it be masonry or carpentry to electrical to plumbing,” said Stoughton, who served on the apprenticeship trust committee for the Kulpsville project.

“It’s a great alternative for any kid coming out of high school.”

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