

WMIA 2012 Wooden Globe Winner: Blum

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Rising high school senior Spencer Davis beat out other applicants for the chance at an apprenticeship with Blum Inc., at the furniture hardware manufacturer's Stanley, NC plant. And 18 years later, he's still there.

"It was a good deal, especially for me," says Davis, who always liked working with his hands. Blum's offer of "hands-on training and a free education" he says, was irresistible, especially since college looked to be financially out of reach. After four years of apprenticeship, Davis became a Blum employee. Later course work earned Davis a spot as an industrial engineer at the company that gave him his start.

Davis's success are the sort of outcome Blum sought when it started Apprenticeship 2000 in partnership with Charlotte-based Central Piedmont Community College and one other NC manufacturing company in 1995. Blum's Apprenticeship 2000 program won this year's Woodworking Machinery Industry Association Wooden Globe Award in education.

Davis and his boss now figure out plant layout to accommodate new machinery, determine employee counts needed for different processes, and superintend ergonomic improvements and packaging of finished products from the 360-person factory.

"We knew that the technology wouldn't stop advancing," says Apprenticeship Manager Andreas Thurner. "We had to have people to run the machines we wanted to build."

Under Apprenticeship 2000, Blum selects up to four apprentices a year from 30 North Carolina high schools and from within its own workforce, paying tuition toward an Associate in Applied Science in Manufacturing Technology, and four years of training at Blum's plant. They take on progressively tougher tasks, starting with hand tools and later programming CNC machines in Blum's 4,800-square-foot training area with its \$1.8 million in equipment.

At the end of four years, a job at Blum awaits apprentices. An 80 percent retention rate after five years in their selected trades speaks well of the training, says Thurner; 16 percent of Blum's workforce are graduates of the program.

Anthony Rowe, who finished his internship 11 years ago, has since progressed to machinist coordinator. He schedules all the work, coordinates with other Blum planners, and coordinates with external vendors, purchasing and engineering." His expertise is called on "when there are any changes made to parts or a new machine is being built and we need to make parts for that."

At first, "I wasn't real strong with the technical, hands-on stuff," says Rowe. His apprenticeship transformed him from "being very weak in craftsmanship to being one of the stronger ones."

Apprenticeship 2000 is based on an Austrian model from Blum's home base, but it was tailored to the U.S. plant's needs, says Thurner. The Apprenticeship 2000 model also serves eight other area manufacturers now partnering with Blum in the program.

A rigorous selection process begins with a presentation by a Blum representative to men and women high school juniors. Those who show aptitude are invited to compete for a paid summer internship. Apprentices chosen from this pool work with mentors within Blum's workforce, who are trained to work one-on-one with apprentices.

Preparation for specific careers comes later in the program, for prospective tool-and-die makers, machine technicians, mechanics, injection molding technicians, CNC machinists, mechatronics electrician and quality technicians. "We also have our graduates in marketing and in cost accounting, engineering, management," says Thurner. A company willing to do all this, and to spend the estimated \$160,000 per apprentice that Blum does, discovers that "You can invest in your people," says Thurner. By doing so, he says, "You can grow your business and compete against the low labor markets in the world."