

WMIA 2014 Educator GWTPP Prepares Tomorrow's Woodworkers - Today

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With woodworking companies challenged to find skilled workers, the importance of educators stepping in to prepare tomorrow's workforce is high — for the health of the industry as well as those looking for training and employment. The Woodworking Machinery Industry Association's 2014 Wooden Globe award winner for Educator of the Year, Doug Rappe, is doing his part.

Rappe is the instructor and program coordinator for Chicago's Greater West Town Training Partnership, an adult vocational training program focused on preparing disadvantaged inner city Chicago area men and women for jobs in the local woodworking industry.

"The Educator of the Year award is a real honor for us to receive and comes at a time when industry recognition and validation of what we do is more important than ever," says Rappe. "With government funding to programs like ours continuously in jeopardy, we are very pleased to have recognition at the national level to make a case for the need for what we do."

Since 1993, Greater West Town has placed 713 under-employed men and women in skilled jobs within the industry. The program teaches students woodworking essentials, including solid wood and panel processing, edgebanding, cabinet assembly and CNC operation.

"Our graduates go to work for a broad range of companies representing every aspect of the woodworking industry, from custom furniture and millwork to picture frames and musical instruments," says Rappe. "Training is full time and is designed as a fast-track to quality employment opportunities."

Using a community-business partnership model, training is provided at no cost to program participants and free job placement services are given to its employer partners. The program is funded predominantly by performance-based contracts with federal, state and local government entities with additional support from a number of private philanthropic foundations.

The class runs 15 weeks for a total of 450 hours of training and Rappe says graduates are typically working within a month of completing the program. Greater West Town is also a Woodwork Career Alliance Accredited Evaluation Center, so all of its participants are issued a WCA passport and have the opportunity to achieve the basic certification.

Partnering with Industry

Greater West Town looks closely at the needs of local employer partners, while maintaining focus on the industry at large, sharing its experience with companies, especially start-ups or those moving into new areas of work. The program is often looked to as a resource, not only for skilled entry level workers, but also for technical advice and as a venue for networking, Rappe says.

From the beginning, employer involvement has been key in Greater West Town's success. Companies host tours and provide guest lectures on special topics. When government cuts threatened funding, employer partners have stepped in and lobbied for continued and often expanded financial aid for the program.

"Before we recruited a single individual for training we had a committed advisory board of local company owners and managers," Rappe says "A few pledged to hire from the first graduating class before the program was even up and running. This group continues to provide guidance on everything from curriculum content to equipment selection."

Some of the equipment found in the LEED-certified former factory building, includes: a Weeke CNC machining center, Felder shaper and horizontal boring and mortising machine, Brandt edgebander, SCMI pin router, Altendorf sliding table saw, Blum hinge boring and insertion machine, Universal Laser Systems laser engraver, Powermatic table saws and planer, Moak jointer, Whirlwind sander and Buffering widebelt sander.

Students get experience operating and setting up equipment during the full-time curriculum. Each student works on individual projects like furniture or cabinetry, as well as takes part in a production project during the course of training.

“We have a well equipped shop by most standards, but it is an ongoing challenge to keep equipment up to date,” adds Rappe. “We have devoted 12,000 square feet of our facility to the training program. Roughly half of this space is available for additional equipment and future program expansion.”

Greater West Town considers the WMIA partners in that member companies provide training on equipment and the association shares the mission of supporting and advancing the work of wood products manufacturing companies. Rappe also credits representatives of WMIA member firms for connecting Greater West Town to wood products manufacturing companies in the area.

“At Greater West Town, we understand woodworking as a manufacturing pursuit, and one where skilled workers and advanced equipment are the key to success, whether you are making one of something or one thousand,” says Rappe. “Our training program reflects this understanding and we know that maintaining a shop with the best equipment and latest technology is crucial to our success in attracting people to careers in woodworking.”

WOODEN GLOBE EDUCATION WINNER

The Woodworking Machinery Industry Association awarded Chicago's Greater West Town Training Partnership the 2014 Wooden Globe for its commitment to education in providing a skilled workforce for local-area woodworking firms. The curriculum honored by this award always includes hands-on training on high technology machinery supplied by WMIA member companies.

GWTTTP was nominated by Bill Esler of Woodworking Network through the Education Committee.

A vocational training program, GWTTTP's Woodworkers Training Program prepares men and women for skilled jobs in the wood products and solid surface manufacturing industry. Since 1993, the program has graduated 713 trainees.

“Students are here for a typical work day, five days a week,” says Doug Rappe, program coordinator and lead instructor at GWTTTP.

“Our goal is to give them a solid base of skills so they can develop a career path in woodworking.”

GWTTTP is also a Woodwork Career Alliance Accredited Evaluation Center.