

CCRI collaborates on boat composites program

"People in the same boat should help each other."

- Chinese proverb

In recent years, Rhode Island boat builders found themselves in the same proverbial boat. The public demand for their product was increasing, while the availability of better building materials and methods was improving rapidly. The biggest factor keeping this industry from a major growth spurt was the lack of employees trained in composite manufacturing-the newest trend in boat-building.

Enter the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and the Community College of Rhode Island. The workforce developer (RIEDC) and the workforce educator (CCRI) joined forces with one of the most technologically advanced boat builders in Southern New England to create a 10-week composite training program that would grow skilled workers in the field.

Composites, first used in the space industry, combine fibrous materials, such as Kevlar, fiberglass or carbon fiber, with a binding agent such as resin or epoxy to form a lightweight, stress-resistant product ready for molding and manipulation. Increasingly, composite technology has been used in the boat building industry, as well as in the manufacturing of sports equipment and large-scale artwork.

In seeking a training location, RIEDC representatives chose to approach Bristol-based Goetz Custom Boats for its stellar reputation-Goetz has built nine America's Cup Class boats-and its state-of-the-art technologies-Goetz was one of the first boat builders to use aerospace-grade composites in its construction processes. Could Goetz house a CCRI composites training program on site? Representatives from Goetz, like other boat builders in need of skilled technicians, saw in this educational program a golden opportunity not only for the industry but also for Goetz's own workforce and agreed to sign on.

"Goetz offered us a unique opportunity to partner with an industry leader and conduct training in their facilities," says Paul Harden, business and workforce development manager for the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation. "Students get to see the skills they'll be using everyday on the job."

The first 10-week class took place this summer with nine students enrolled. While half of the students paid their own tuition, the others received financing through the federally-funded Workforce Investment Act. Before classes started, CCRI Training Coordinator Joanne Galliano first oversaw the screening of program applicants, who needed to achieve a ninth-grade level of proficiency in math and reading. Once in the program, the students learned first-hand about safety training, fabric construction, mold-making, lamination and vacuum bagging as they created two actual boats within Goetz's manufacturing facilities.

The training offered Goetz representatives the unique chance to see future employees in action. Goetz Vice President John Telfeyan says, "From day one we knew what they [the students] could do. They were valuable to us right out of the box." Telfeyan says Goetz wasn't the only composites company that saw these graduates as valuable. "The students could also walk into any other shops, and in many of them they would know more than the normal guy working there," he says.

Throughout the program, Telfeyan's phone was ringing off the hook with queries from other composite-dependent manufacturers. "We got a lot of calls asking us when they [the students] were going to graduate," he says.

At the conclusion of the program, Goetz ended up hiring five of the graduates, but not without some competition. Graduate Troy Cook reports that he received three job offers before deciding to work at

Goetz. Cook, a trained graphic designer, enrolled in the program as a way to change his career direction. "I have always loved boating, and always wanted to get involved in boat-building," he says. "This program was a way to get my foot in the door."

Cook said that while he did have knowledge of boating basics, many in the class had never been exposed to the sport before. "We spent a day or two on boat terminology: port and starboard, fore and aft," he says.

Telfeyan concurs, and marvels at the students' rapid progress from novices to experts. "In the beginning, most of them had no experience in composites at all," he says. What made them successful in the program, he feels, was their desire to learn.

Less than two months at his new job, CCRI composites program graduate Chuck Noreau reports that he is working on a structural installation for a boat that will ultimately berth in New Zealand. Meanwhile, classmate and fellow employee Cook has just taken a mast v-brace out of a six-foot-high oven. He calls this piece a "doozie" and reports that it took over two weeks to put the mold together and get the piece "cooked."

Both men are doing exceptionally well in their new workplace, according to Telfeyan. The feeling is apparently mutual. Says Cook, "I love coming here everyday."

For more information on the composite boat building program, contact the CCRI Division for Lifelong Learning at 825-2033.