

Butler Eagle

Creating a Spark

BC3 program gets woman on right path

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BUTLER TWP — Last year, after 10 months of unemployment, Heidi Long wasn't sure where to turn.

The 35-year-old mother had worked as a restaurant manager for several years. But after a layoff, she had trouble finding a job to help support her family. She needed a spark.

She decided to make a career change to welding, an in-demand field, and she was able to do that with Butler County Community College's JobTrakPA program.

Fate, it seems, introduced her to the world of welding. Her future career, like welding metal, became malleable.

Her fiancé, a Steamfitters welder, introduced her to welding. Once he showed her how it was done, she knew it was something she had to try for herself.

“I wanted something different, something new, something more stable,” said Long of Butler, who is a Seattle-area native.

It wasn't long before she discovered affordable classes at BC3.

Job training

The statewide JobTrakPA program was created in 2011 for displaced workers to be trained in jobs that are in demand. It is one program among many in the country.

The U.S. Department of Labor funded the \$2 billion, nationwide effort over four years through 2014. It is called the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training.



Heidi Long is a graduate of Butler County Community College's JobTrakPA program and a welder at Cygnus Manufacturing in Saxonburg. The 35-year-old mother was looking for something more stable, and she says the job training at BC3 was the right choice.

In Pennsylvania, all 14 community colleges have JobTrakPA programs. At BC3, there are classes in the energy and advanced manufacturing fields.

Programs vary by each college, and other schools in Pennsylvania offer health-related classes.

Most classes are free, which is great, said Karen Zapp, project manager at JobTrakPA.

“At a trade school, these courses would cost thousands of dollars,” she said. “If BC3 was offering a roustabout class (without funding), it would cost \$3,000.”

Classes vary from 40 to 60 hours over several weeks. Since last year, more than 100 students have taken classes.

Placement rates vary, depending on industry and interest, but people from all sorts of backgrounds have taken the classes.

“People come from very desperate parts of life,” said Jerry Johnston, career coach with JobTrakPA.

“We've had people as young as 18 and as old as 61, 62 ... They're looking for help, and training to get them into something that's a stable industry.”

Long is a standout example of that.

'Long'ing to work

Now that Long took welding classes at BC3 last fall, she's working as an intern at Cygnus Manufacturing in Saxonburg. Officials there intend to hire her full-time following her six-month internship, which ends in September.

“Exposure to the type of welding we do, the precision of it. It's custom, not cookie cutter,” said Ed Lawther, a welding working group leader at Cygnus, who is Long's direct supervisor. “Heidi has a terrific attitude. You have to want to do this.”

She's also good at precision welding. One reason is because she practiced doing it a lot at BC3, coming to class early and staying late.

“I really, really loved it and wanted to keep doing it,” she said.

Cygnus manufactures items in medical, aerospace and transportation materials, depending on demand.

In demand

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are nearly 50,000 welders, machine setters, operators and tenders in the United States as of May 2012. The median annual wage is \$34,720.

And for oil and gas roustabouts, the other field JobTrakPA offers at BC3, there are almost 60,000 workers in the United States. Their annual median wage is similar, at \$34,130.

There also are classes in the oil and gas field, but they might not necessarily jobs that someone might think of.

“There are so many ancillary industries. It's not necessarily walking out of here and getting a job at a gas rig,” Johnston said.

There are some who drive water trucks or sand trucks who have gone through the program. While Johnston admits those kinds of jobs are not for everyone, welding and energy are fields that provide a bit more job security than others.

And for Long, it's been a game-changer.

“It was such a good program,” she said. “I'm grateful to them and that whole program.”

She also said, “I have a skill set that's never going to go away.”

The JobTrakPA program at BC3 is funded through September 2014. Officials are unsure whether funding will be extended.