

BC3 grads help Team USA stay hot in Winter Games

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Butler County Community College graduates Ross Wells, Amber Omstead and Jason Letzelter are shown Thursday, Feb. 15, 2018, at their workplace, Butler Technologies, Butler, where they helped to manufacture 1,900 flexible plastic heating elements depicting a U.S. flag and bonded into the Ralph Lauren parkas and bomber jackets debuted by Team USA in the 2018 Winter Olympics.

(Butler, PA) The fingerprints on the hottest clothing in what might be the coldest Winter Olympics in 30 years can be traced to at least three former Butler County Community College students, among 17 employed by Butler Technologies, which designed, engineered and manufactured 1,900 flexible plastic heating elements bonded into the Ralph Lauren parkas debuted by Team USA in the Pyeongchang Games.

Or so Jason Letzelter wishes.

“I think our inspection department wiped them all down,” he said of the 10.5-inch by 6.5-inch heating elements inside the limited-edition parkas and patterned to depict a U.S. flag, “but you

can still kind of hope that maybe the ink wasn't 100 percent cured and my fingerprints just kind of remained."

Conductive ink – composed of silver and carbon, colored in blue-gray or gray, and activated by a separated battery pack – coats and heats the pliable plastic. A handheld control allows the Olympian to choose among three warmth settings to heat the flag, positioned vertically atop the parka's back.

It's cutting-edge technology whose layered width, one-third that of a credit card, got a charge of Letzelter's parents, Larry and Terry, as they watched the Opening Ceremony in which the Winter Games' first heated clothing premiered.

It also got a charge out of BC3 graduate Ross Wells. And out of BC3 graduate Amber Omstead. And their supervisor, Tristan Tripodi, who as general manager of Butler Technologies employs 62, among them former BC3 students who serve as the screen printer's quality and engineering managers; and employees in the company's assembly, customer service, purchasing, engineering, scheduling, graphic design and finishing areas.

"Pretty much every single department is covered," Tripodi said, "by someone who has gone to BC3."

"It's on! It's on! It's on!"

Letzelter, of Saxonburg, a graphic designer at Butler Technologies who chose BC3 @ Cranberry's graphic design program and graduated with an associate in applied science degree in 2015, was cooking chicken and rice – "really the only thing I know how to make" – for his parents for dinner on Feb. 9 when Team USA marched into Pyeongchang Olympic Stadium.

"They were watching it," Letzelter, 22, said of his parents viewing the tape-delayed broadcast. "They were saying, 'It's on! It's on! It's on!' They knew full well that I had helped to make the flags in the parkas."

Team USA, at 242 members the largest in 23 Winter Olympics, was the 26th of 92 national squads to enter the venue to begin what could be the coldest games since a record temperature of 12 degrees Fahrenheit was recorded in Lillehammer, Norway, in 1994 during the competitions. The low in Pyeongchang during the games through Wednesday has been 17 degrees, set three



Snowboarder Jamie Anderson models a Ralph Lauren parka worn by Team USA during the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, in this undated photo provided by Ralph Lauren. Three Butler County Community College students were among employees of Butler Technologies who helped in the design, engineering and manufacture of flexible plastic heating elements bonded into the parkas and debuted by Team USA in the Pyeongchang Games.

nights after the two-hour and 18-minute Opening Ceremony viewed by the Letzelters and nearly 28 million others on NBC.

“This put Butler Technologies on the world map,” Letzelter said. “I was watching and my mom and dad said, ‘Can you see the flags from the outside?’ And I said, ‘No, you have to imagine what it looks like underneath all those layers.’”

Omstead imagines that she could be an Olympic curler or snowboarder. In reality, the psychology major who in 2012 earned an associate of arts degree from BC3 before attaining a bachelor’s degree at Carlow University knows that U.S. athletes 6,700 miles and 14 time zones away are warming up to heating elements she laser-cut into rectangles and stacked a minute at a time.

“They didn’t even look like they were shivering at all at the Opening Ceremony,” said Omstead, a 24-year-old finishing operator from Butler. “They looked happy and proud.”

BC3 “helped me to figure out what I wanted to do”

Like Wells and Letzelter, Omstead is happy and proud of the education she received at BC3 that prepared her for the career she chose.

“My two years at BC3 was a lot of turning into a well-rounded person, taking a number of electives,” Omstead said. “That helped me to figure out what I wanted to do.”

Among the elective courses Omstead selected at BC3 was Autodesk’s computer-aided design, “which helped here when I started running the lasers,” she said. “It gave me a better understanding of where I was. Because otherwise I had zero experience at all with any of this when I came here. BC3 gave me an open mind to be ready for anything. That was part of it.

“BC3,” Omstead said, “is a great community college. The people who come from BC3, they work hard. They have a realistic head on their shoulders. They went there. They got their education. Now they are ready to apply their education. Ross is a great guy. He does a really great job. He handles a ton of things here.”



Sled hockey player Rico Roman models a Ralph Lauren bomber jacket to be worn by Team USA during the Closing Ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, in this undated photo provided by Ralph Lauren. Three Butler County Community College students were among employees of Butler Technologies who helped in the design, engineering and manufacture of flexible plastic heating elements bonded into the bomber jackets and debuted by Team USA in the Pyeongchang Games.

Wells, 30, of Butler and who like Letzelter studied graphic design at BC3 @ Cranberry, graduated with an associate in applied arts degree from BC3 in 2007.

“My job is really software-driven,” said Wells, an engineering and graphics supervisor who began as a part-time employee at Butler Technologies while a BC3 student. “We use a lot of AutoCAD and SolidWorks software in engineering, and Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop in graphics. I took a lot of classes that evolved around those specific software programs at BC3. That was a big help.

“The education I got,” Wells said, “put me in a good position to work here.”

General manager: BC3 offers “solid education”

Letzelter and Omstead have worked for three years at Butler Technologies, whose staff also benefits from BC3’s noncredit Workforce Development business training programs, Tripodi said.

“We do a lot of training through BC3, Excel, Word, purchasing classes,” he said. “A lot of people have found great benefit in that. We have also done leadership training with BC3. Pretty much anything BC3 has offered, I guarantee that somebody here has taken it in the past five years.”

Many of the 17 former BC3 students at Butler Technologies, founded in 1990, are longtime employees, Tripodi said.

“They have been able to find a home here and be good, solid contributors,” Tripodi said. “If they have been here that long, they are obviously good at what they do. And hopefully they enjoy what they do here.”

BC3, the general manager said, represents an option for those who “know they don’t have to go to a four-year school” to become educated for a career.

“There are real jobs here that are in manufacturing and also in design,” Tripodi said. “There are a lot of different things that can be done here in Butler, and it is nice to be able to pull people from local resources to do that. People want to stay local and they want to find good jobs locally. So getting a solid education is very important, and that is what BC3 offers.”

“I got the whole college experience,” BC3 grad says

Added Letzelter: “To me, and I think people hear this all the time, nothing else really makes sense. Why would you go to another school and spend \$20,000 or \$40,000 a year for something you can get for \$4,000 or \$5,000 a year right at home?”

“I got the whole college experience,” said Letzelter, among the 75 percent of BC3 students who graduate debt-free. “Side by side with people who went elsewhere, I know the same exact things. I know people who went to art school in Pittsburgh. They used the same books I did. And they are paying so much more. That is what I didn’t understand. I would tell them that.”

He would also tell them what he heard from Kristine Allen, a graphic design and photography instructor at BC3 @ Cranberry, whose 65-credit associate in applied arts degree program includes courses in electronic art and design, creative thinking, introduction to graphic arts production, applied media art and illustration, and design organization.

“This is a risky field,” Allen says. “And you really have to perform to even be a part of it. You really have to shine. And you really have to show your stuff.”

His stuff, and that of Wells, Omstead and 14 other Butler Technologies workers who attended BC3, is now being shown on an international stage, in what Tripodi calls his company’s highest-profile project – and one that will be showcased again when U.S. Olympians don Ralph Lauren bomber jackets heated by the same Butler Technologies flag at Sunday night’s Closing Ceremony.

“Pretty awesome,” Tripodi said of the recognition his company’s heating element has received. “It is nice to know where it was made, that we had a lot to do with the development and the production of it.”

Letzelter said he and his parents were watching the U.S. Olympians over his chicken and rice dinner, “and it did blow my mind, looking at everyone wearing those Opening Ceremony parkas, and knowing for a fact that I touched it.”