

The Tennessee Tribune

Learning a Craft Leads to Good Jobs in the Building Trades

NASHVILLE, TN — When you finish high school you can go to school, go to jail, or go to work. Trade schools used to provide practical training that led to good-paying jobs. In the U.S. today, few high schools offer shop classes and trade schools have been out of vogue for decades. But Job-training programs are making a comeback.

Remington College has a new heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) program at their Elm Hill Pike campus. The one-year program teaches basic refrigeration and covers motors, condensers, and HVAC installation and repair.

The tuition is \$16,000 that covers tuition, books, and materials. The school helps students apply for loans or grants while they attend classes.



James Perkins installs a furnace in Remington College's new HVAC lab.

A lot of home building is going on in Nashville and surrounding counties. With a HVAC certification, there are plenty of job opportunities for HVAC technicians.

"We've always focused on real skills for the real world and career-focused training," said Angel Almond, President of Remington's Nashville campus.

Remington trains pharmacy techs, medical and dental assistants, and has offered an associate degree in Criminal Justice since 2004.

James Perkins retired after two decades in the HVAC business. He just wanted to teach part time but wound up designing Remington's HVAC course, installing the equipment, and is now running the program.

"The course is designed to give them information and practice so when they leave they know what to do, know the tools and how to use them, and more than that, they know why they are doing whatever they are doing." says Perkins.

Remington's program is geared to residential HVAC rather than commercial applications that are bigger, more technical, and require more than a year's training.

On the other side of town at Nashville Sheet Metal Workers Local 177 on Alabama Avenue, journeymen have been training apprentices since 1982. Here's the beauty of it: you earn money while you go to school that costs you nothing. After ninety days you get full family health insurance and start a retirement plan.



Apprentice electricians learning Ohm's Law and Watt's Law.

Students go to school two nights a week and work for a union contractor during the day. It's a four-year program and you have to be 18 with a GED or high school diploma to apply. The union has eighty-five apprentices in its program this year.

"When you take the test and if you are accepted as an apprentice, then when a contractor calls in and needs an apprentice, we will send them out to whatever contractor needs the help," said Steve Burgett, President of Local 177.

Burgett works as a Computer Assisted Drawing (CAD) operator at John McDougall Company, a metal fabricator and longtime union contractor. He began his apprenticeship in August 1977. By 1981 he was out and has been making journeyman wages ever since.

"Once you get your training in, you can go anywhere in the country and go to work for a union local. It's good pay, good benefits. A person can make a good living doing this. It's hard work but it's good work. It's just a good trade to get in if you want to do something with your hands," he said.

Heather Craig is one of two women in her class who likes working with her hands. She said a lot of the men who started with her have dropped out but none of the women have.

"I was serving tables before so this is an hourly job and it's done a lot better for me with benefits and stuff. I like it," Craig said.

Timothy Watson and his wife are both in their second year. They have eight-year-old twin sons, live in Smyrna, and commute an hour every day to the McDougall plant off Briley Parkway. Watson says he is not competitive but his wife is.

"We're probably going to stay here. We've got a lot of construction and the city's growing pretty fast and our future is looking pretty good," he said.

Fifteen union locals in the building and construction trades run apprenticeship programs in Nashville or nearby. Nashville union locals train carpenters, bricklayers, masons, elevator constructors, electricians, heat and frost insulators, ironworkers, laborers, millwrights, operating engineers, plumbers, pipefitters, and teamsters.

These skilled jobs pay at least double the average wage in Tennessee. With benefits, they pay four or more times the minimum wage.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 429 on Fessler's Lane runs a 4 ½ year program.

"There's no tuition for the school. It's the contractors and the union who pay for the education," said Bob Emery, Business Manager of Local 429.

Apprentices make about \$13/hr. until they become journeyman who make \$26/hr. With benefits it's about \$40/hr. Electricians get full family health coverage with medical, dental, vision, and prescription all paid for by their employer.

"As far as the schooling, there's 210 classroom hours a year and a total of 8000 hours of on the job training before you graduate to journeymen," Emery said.

There are 155 apprentices in the IBEW program now and another fifty will start in January.

Emery said that kids are smarter today and a lot more of them are finishing the program than in the past. He said that about 45 percent of apprentices that come right out of high school drop out of the program because they don't know what they're getting into.

But the ones who stick it out and become journeyman will retire at age sixty-five with a \$2 million retirement package, all paid for by union contractors.

"There's probably 40 different contractors in Middle Tennessee that use the IBEW as their sole source and exclusive source for manpower and their training comes from here," Emery said.

The reason, according to union organizer Steve Goolsby, is because getting a job done right and on time with skilled workers is worth the money.



Heather Craig grinds steel at John McDougall Company, a metal fabricator and longtime union contractor.

“They bring our people in because they know the craft and they know what it takes to put something in a project. Compared to hiring somebody who has never done sheet metal work before, there is a daylight night difference,” Goolsby said.

Both the Sheet Metal workers union and IBEW are part of a federally funded program called Helmets to Hardhats. They actively recruit military veterans to enter their programs.

Kevin Wilson is a former soldier and now works as a union electrician.

“Coming to IBEW made it easier to transition to civilian life. I was able to find a family and able to bring the bonds I had in the military and the family environment I had with my brothers of war, I found it in the civilian world,” Wilson said.

“There are a lot of us in here and it gives us someone to talk to. It’s great. I think it saved my life,” he said.