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BOOT CAMP ADVANTAGE

A carpentry-challenged writer gets a handle on power tools

BY JIM VEENBAAS

'm typically afraid of power tools, the kind of guy who was once rushed to emergency after an accident involving an electric can opener. Learning how to turn on a circular saw and cut a piece of wood without injuring myself is a monumental event in my life. I can still feel the rush of adrenaline that hit me when I powered up the big saw in the vast chamber of a NAIT wood shop during Merit Contractors Association's Construction Boot Camp in February. It took me twice as long as anyone else, but all 13 of my classmates applauded when I finally lopped off a small chunk of wood. Merit must have designed the program with greenhorns just like me in mind - someone who wouldn't know a measuring tape from a laser level.

NAIT instructor Mike Bodnaresk managed to keep me interested by sprinkling his lessons with jokes and personal anecdotes. We learned about a wide variety of tools, everything from air compressors and excavators to concrete vibrators and small engines. Bodnaresk goes through a lot of material in a very short period of time.

"I give my students a taste of what's happening out there in the construction industry," says Bodnaresk. "When I was young, I had to learn everything the hard way. These guys will be entering the industry with some sound knowledge of basic construction principles."

Merit and Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry have sponsored four boot camps since June 2006, with a total of 52 graduating students. The concept is simple yet powerful. Two weeks are spent teaching the basics of construction and linking students with prospective employers. Virtually all of them find employment within days of graduation and many are now registered apprentices. Boot camp graduates are a little more easily absorbed into a company than someone who just walks in from the street.

"They don't have the time to teach them the basics like we do," says Jay Bortnik, employment coordinator for Merit Contractors Association. "For the students, we have important contacts in the industry and helping them find good jobs is a core part of our program. If they are worried about leaving the stability of their current job, this program eliminates some of the risk."

Will Lewthwaite has been working in retail sales for more than a decade and was lured into the program with the prospect of finally earning a good wage.

"Now that I have been exposed to the different aspects of construction, I feel really comfortable," says the 30-year-old. "I'm confident I can handle most construction jobs and do them well and safely."

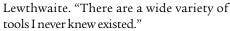
The course is short and intense-80 hours in two weeks-so students have to be committed if they hope to handle the workload. Before they are accepted into the program, prospective students must first complete a series of pre-screening interviews. That helps Merit determine if they are suited for the industry and are serious about a career

The first week of class focuses on the basics of construction and the second week on small tools and equipment. There is first-aid training, preparation for workplace culture and training in employability skills. Students also earn provincial certificates for Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) and Construction Safety Training System (CSTS.)

"I had a basic understanding of some stuff, but we really learned some of the intricate details involved in construction," says

ON THE CUTTING EDGE: Rookie Jim Veenbaas conquers his fear of power tools at Construction Boot Camp





Construction Boot Camp is nothing like my high-school shop class. Overwhelmingly, people in the program are experiencing a career transition, says Bortnik. Merit has seen everything from teachers to civil servants in their classes. One of my classmates has multiple university degrees, but has struggled to find work in her field. As I watched, she cut through two-by-fours like they were butter.

"Most of our students are working in low-wage jobs in the service or retail sector," says Bortnik. "They see their friends making good money in the construction industry and they want to get involved too."

I'm not going to ditch my writing career for the trades, but at least I can now walk up to a nail gun without hyperventilating. For that, I tip my hat to Merit. I came away from Boot Camp with some practical knowledge, hands-on training with power tools, and I still have all my fingers and toes. Next time something minor needs to be done around the house, instead of begging my wife to grab my power drill, I might just do it myself. Ω



