

The Kids Are All Right

The Registered
Apprenticeship
Program gets a ring
of endorsement from
employers and
Alberta's future
workforce

BY ROSS HENDERSON



ON-THE-JOB TRAINING: In high school, Don Massong (left), now 22, was eager to learn the carpentry trade. He enrolled in the RAP program and was hired by Bob Genee (right), district manager of Coram Construction Inc.



PHOTOGRAPH BY EWAN NICHOLSON

m entoring high-school students

enrolled in Alberta's Registered Apprenticeship Program has turned out to be a savvy business move for Bob Genee, district manager of Coram Construction in Calgary. His company has coached about 20 students over the past decade under the program, often scrunched down to its acronym RAP. "You know," says Genee, "I have carpenters now that started with me as Grade 10 students, who were RAP students, who are now lead hands and supervisors out in the field."

High-school students enrolled in RAP get a head start earning hours toward a journeyman certificate in one of 51 trades, and the program is a part of a much-needed solution to Alberta's forecasted shortage of tradespeople over the next decade. ▶

Merit Contractors Association has played an important role in the program's success since RAP was formed in 1991 with only five students. In 2005, RAP set a record for the highest number of apprenticeship scholarships awarded to high-school students. Two hundred and twenty-six students received a \$1,000 RAP scholarship.

Graeme Proudfoot, special projects coordinator for Merit, says the open-shop organization placed more than 200 RAP students with member employers last year. "We are the largest employer of RAP kids in the province," he says. "We're encouraging contractors to give it a try because it's a win-win situation up front." Proudfoot has spent eight years working with CAREERS: The Next Generation in a formal partnership to educate high-school students

time the student graduates high school, they will have collected enough hours to enter the first year of a three- or four-year apprenticeship training course at schools like NAIT and SAIT.

It's a no-nonsense introduction into the work world for students, says Coram Construction's Genee. "They get to work with people who have been in the industry for 10, 20, 30 years. A RAP apprentice carpenter will not be doing work with circular saws or major tools when he first starts the job because he will not have that type of background." The student is mostly a close observer as he or she works with a journeyman mentor on smaller, safer projects.

Rich Rogi, co-owner of Nose Creek Electrical Services in Calgary, gives RAP a big thumbs-up, calling it "overall, a great

"Toward a Bright Future: Recommendations for Addressing Skills Shortages in Western Canada," warns that 73 of the 76 major industry associations in the West can expect "moderate to severe" worker shortages over the next five years. As it stands, the number of students graduating from post-secondary institutions with apprenticeship training will not be enough to meet the demands of industry.

One of the goals of RAP is to stem the tide of high-school students dropping their books in favour of earning a paycheque. Massong is one of those teenagers who considered quitting high school. "I wasn't doing too well with my grades. I just wanted to get into the workforce," he says. "I was thinking about dropping out of school and I heard

THE REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM IS A NO-NONSENSE INTRODUCTION TO A TRADES CAREER. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN IN THE INDUSTRY FOR YEARS AND EMPLOYERS CAN MENTOR FUTURE WORKERS. IT'S A WIN-WIN SITUATION FOR ALL INVOLVED.

about opportunities in the trades and how to remain in high school while working towards a career.

Merit wears a number of different hats in its partnership with CAREERS, chiefly finding placements for the students, but also by attending workshops, trade fairs and career days.

"CAREERS will say, 'I need three carpenters and 47 electricians' and I start calling our member companies that take on apprentices, or that have a past involvement, to see if I can negotiate a placement opportunity. We're interested in the same thing - to make sure those kids don't overlook opportunities."

Under RAP rules, regulated by Alberta Learning, students must arrive to work on time and focus on the required skills to become a journeyman. They must also complete their high school education. An employer who hires an apprentice enters into a partnership with the government and schools to ensure safety regulations are followed and the learning experience is productive. The student, school and employer agree to a flexible schedule that allows the RAP apprentice to work for a semester, half a school day, for a few days a week, or over summers, holidays and weekends. By the

program." Rogi says word spread quickly about RAP when general contractors and sub-contractors who had mentored students began raving about the program. "It helped our business because we can introduce high-school kids into the construction industry," he says, "and perhaps they can learn if they want to pursue a job in the industry." There's such a lack of interest and shortage of workers, that tradesmen can almost write their own ticket, adds Rogi. "It's an employee's market, right now. There are lots of companies out there and lots of work. Guys are willing to pick and choose where they want to go."

The first time Don Massong walked onto the job as a 15-year-old high-school student, he was admittedly a bit nervous, but eager to learn the carpentry trade. He stuck with RAP and now, at the age of 22, he's a journeyman carpenter and the lead hand on a job at the city's Bearspaw Water Treatment Plant. The time he spent at Coram Construction proved critical. "I learned a lot there," he says. "I had really good mentors."

A lack of skilled workers is a problem that is expected to get even worse for industry in Western Canada. A January report from the Canada West Foundation titled

about this RAP program through my sister because she was doing it for motorcycle mechanics."

Massong immediately set up a meeting with his high school guidance counsellor, met with and was approved by a potential employer. He then enrolled in RAP and was soon on the job and on the road to becoming a carpenter. RAP appeals to students because they can earn a wage under the program, something of a status symbol among teenagers. "You get a head start financially. You're making money in high school and all your friends are just sitting around doing nothing." The money was only an inducement - the employment program has paved a clear path for his future. As Massong puts it, "I'm 22 years old and I'm a journeyman carpenter. I'm making \$28 an hour and there are guys here my age who are just starting to get into the trade. I have the advantage there. I learned lots early on."

Now, he finds himself in the proud and sometimes awkward position of being a lead hand, telling other carpenters what to do. "You help out with the foreman delegating tasks to other apprentices or journeyman carpenters," he says. "The majority of guys around here are in their mid-30s up



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to their 60s. It can be difficult at times being the young guy. A lot of guys don't want to listen to you, but you get over it. You learn how to deal with stuff like that. You've just got to pretty much keep your cool and when they see that you know what you're doing, they'll have a little more trust in you."

Carpentry gives Massong a real sense of accomplishment. "There's something to look at when you're done and you can say, 'You know, I did that.' It gives you a lot of pride. It's different every day, you're always building a new part of the job." But this particular RAP star doesn't want to rise too quickly. "Right now, I'm only 22. I don't want to be shotgunned up to foreman position. There's still a lot I'd like to learn, like different systems. I listen to the old guys every day and there's always new ways of building stuff."

Another major supporter of the RAP program is Stuart Olson Contracting Ltd. "We're a very strong proponent of RAP program, have been for a number of years and will continue to be in the future," says Randy Fulton, a superintendent for the company, which is headquartered in Edmonton with offices in Calgary and Vancouver. Fulton, who started in construction as a 17-year-old four decades ago, says the company has hired 11 RAP students in the past year.

Kyle Waterhouse, 18, is a former RAP apprentice who is now working full-time as an apprentice with Stuart Olson. He's just started NAIT for his first year of his four-year carpentry apprenticeship. Waterhouse knew in high school that he wanted a career as a tradesman, so he took courses such as welding and carpentry to prepare. In his final year of high school, he spent the first half in school and the rest of the year working at Stuart Olson. "This gave me a lot of experience and a good head start into a career."

Fulton praises the program and the doors it opens for the next generation. "I think it's a good deal for contractors, in the sense that it gives us an avenue that we can hopefully bring people into the industry," he says. "I don't want people to get the misconception that we're into the RAP program because it provides us with cheap labour. That's not the case. We feel strongly that our strength in the years to come is in the training that we can provide and in the opportunity to be trained. It's difficult in this economy, with the lack of skilled manpower to construct our projects in a timely fashion."

How does the industry resolve that problem? While allowing more immigrants to take up the slack of skilled workers is one solution, Fulton says, it also "behooves us to bring to the younger generation" the chance to work in the thriving construction industry. "For a journeyman carpenter at today's open shop rates, you're looking at earning \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year. That's not chicken feed."

Fulton suggests it's vital for members of the industry to give their support to the RAP students so the program can continue to grow and have some impact on the ballooning worker deficit in the province. "I think it has to keep growing," the veteran carpenter suggests. "If it doesn't then I don't think we've done it the justice it deserves. I think that it is paramount that we entice, cajole, sweet talk, do whatever we have to do to try to get more young people involved. And I mean young people, not young men. There's room in this industry for both genders." ☐