

This month, we look at two ways to enter the building trades: First, we get the perspective of a remodeler's son who is immune to any social stigma attached to the trades. Then we take a walk through a union-training facility in Chicago for a glimpse into a thriving apprenticeship program.

Why I Want to Be a Carpenter

BY CARTER SILVA

I have been interested in carpentry for as long as I can remember. Lucky for me, my dad, Manny Silva, is a good carpenter and started teaching me about carpentry when I was very young. As I've gotten older and more responsible, he has slowly been teaching me the hands-on part of building as well the business part.

Mentors. One big help is that my dad has taken me to carpentry shows such as JLC Live where I have met many important carpenters in the business. One of those carpenters, Gary Katz, has been especially supportive. Gary believes in me and encourages me whenever I see him. When I was just 8 years old, Gary helped me write an article for *This is Carpentry* about installing a fence post. A few years later, I wrote a second article for *TIC* on installing clapboard siding.

Why I like carpentry. I'm interested in carpentry for many reasons. The first is that it's very rewarding to see something I've created by using my hands and my mind. Another reason is that carpenters solve problems by being patient and creatively using what they know.

But most of all, learning carpentry has been really fun.

Like many kids, I got a set of plastic tools when I was younger, and I followed my dad around, copying him with my tools. One of the first carpentry projects that I remember doing was nailing together small scraps of wood that my dad gave me. He started the nails, and then I lined up the boards and nailed them together.

I have always loved going with my dad to lumberyards, helping him pick out and load material into his truck. You can learn a lot at lumberyards. When I was old enough, he started training me to help with estimates by holding the end of the tape measure and by helping him count the items that he needed. Working around our house, he taught me things like the right way to hold the end of a board when he cuts it, and he also let me help with minor demolition jobs.

As I got older, my dad let me tackle more important tasks, like nailing things together, pulling things apart, digging holes, painting, or anything I could safely do with him nearby, carefully supervising. I've helped tear off a porch, build a fence, skim-coat walls inside, build built-ins, install siding, move dirt and rocks, and more.

Looking toward trade school. I remember my dad and older stepbrother taking me to an open house at a trade school. In the carpentry shop, they were letting visitors bang nails into a wooden post. I took a turn and one of the students wanted to start the 1½-inch roofing nail for me. But I told him that I could do it, and I sank that nail in four shots. He said, "Great job! Can you teach that to some of the kids in this school?"

Right now I'm a 6th grader, and I'm pretty sure I want to go to the trade school in 9th grade. After that, the things I look forward to the most are building and repairing things, and driving trucks and heavy equipment. For now I just want to learn as much as I can, so that one day I can have my own carpentry or trucking business.

Carter Silva is an aspiring carpenter, in North Andover, Mass.



Photo: Diane Carter

Union Town

BY SUE AND GREG BURNET

Since the days of railroads and slaughterhouses, Chicago has been known as a union town. So when we received an invitation to visit the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters (CRCC) training facilities, we were intrigued to learn about how a union might work for carpenters in this day and age.

Vince Sticca, director of the Apprentice and Training Program, gave us a tour of the facility in Elk Grove, Ill. The two buildings that make up the center have an impressive 270,000 square feet combined (there's also a facility in Chicago with another 90,000 square feet). Even more impressive were the facility's overall organization and high level of technical sophistication.

THE PROGRAM

Before we delve into some of the cool things we saw, we'll outline the union's program. Potential apprentices must first complete a nine-week pre-apprentice program that includes an OSHA course and first-aid and CPR classes, as well as fundamental tool and safety training. This acts as a trial period to ensure applicants are ready to commit to the apprenticeship program.

The apprenticeship consists of four years of training, after which a carpenter earns a

journeyman card. Apprentices must be continuously employed by a union contractor to be enrolled in the program, and throughout the four years, they must attend one full week of classes at a training facility every three months.

Apprentices also select a specialty track for certification. There are currently 11 specialties offered: Construction—Residential/Commercial, Cabinet Making, Flooring, Lathing, Millwright, Pile Driving, Drywall, Siding, Roofing, Insulation, and Concrete Form Construction. Once a specialty is selected, apprentices are essentially locked in. Students are paid by an employer and all the training classes are covered by the union, so the concept of a “perpetual student” with a shifting focus is discouraged. After an apprenticeship has been completed, however, journeymen can return to take continuing education classes in other specialties, the costs of which are still fully covered by the union.

Each weekly segment consists of classroom and hands-on instruction, followed by a final test. If a student doesn't pass the test, he or she must retake the entire segment. This could mean waiting another three months for the segment to be offered again, potentially adding time to the apprentice-

ship. About 80% of the students do finish their apprenticeship in four years.

The CRCC treats the training facility like a real jobsite. There are no cell phones allowed in the building during training. Safety gear is required to be worn during any activities involving the use of tools or equipment, and tardiness and absenteeism are not tolerated: If students are late, their pay can be docked.

HOW DO I GET IN?

There are 239 training centers across the U.S. and Canada, so the process may vary, but here's how it works in the Illinois region. Only qualified individuals may apply (for a list of basic qualifications, go to carpentersunion.org/programs/apprentice-program), and the first step is to take an aptitude test, which measures basic vocabulary and math skills, reasoning power, and talent for carpentry. Those who pass enter a lottery and are selected at random for enrollment.

To find applicants, the union works with city agencies and schools to create a pipeline for students to enter apprenticeships. It has had a relationship with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) since the 1960s, and while CPS vo-tech programs have been significantly reduced over the years, the program at Dunbar High School on the city's Southeast side has recently been revitalized. The union also exhibits at industry-related trade shows and works with veteran's groups, including Helmets to Hardhats.

COOL STUFF

The CRCC facility has areas set up for specific hands-on training, including a few where apprentices are trained to install multiple products. In the floor-covering section, for example, we saw students installing hardwood, carpet, vinyl, and laminate. We saw a similar variety of products being installed in the roofing and exterior-wall-sheathing areas. The union's goal is to train members on most, if not all, of



Photo: Sue Burnet

the products and materials currently used in each specialty.

To keep pace with how business is done today, the CRCC incorporates technology found on jobsites into the curriculum. The facility has a number of computer labs for classes where there is a job vault similar to what one might encounter on a commercial project. The CRCC also has CNC machines that students are taught to program, as well as a number of virtual training tools. One that was particularly intriguing was a virtual welding rig, which is used in the beginning stages of training, before an apprentice even picks up a welding gun or stick. Though the machines are expensive, they offer instant visual feedback to the students and save on steel and electricity.

Another training area was like a scene from “Let’s Make a Deal”—doors everywhere! That area is used to train and certify students on myriad door hardware options, including newer electronic entry devices. Each door is set up with blanks for mounting a different piece of hardware.

CREATING REAL WORLD CONDITIONS

Training for insulation, specifically spray foam, presents an interesting challenge. Initially, the trainers built walls with a cardboard backing for the students to practice on (the cardboard would be removed and replaced for successive students). This wasn’t accurately replicating a jobsite setting, however, so trainers hit upon the idea of insulating the open exterior walls of the facility itself. They said that once all their buildings have been insulated, they may consider offering free insulation to neighboring businesses.

One innovation we had a chance to see is the Infection Control Risk Assessment, or ICRA, area. This portion of the training was born of the healthcare industry’s need to control the spread of secondary infections. Before ICRA, contractors working in hospitals often treated these sites like any other jobsite. But a seemingly minor disruption to a wall or ceiling might not only dislodge contaminants, but also spread them through the air and ventilation system, where they could become life-threatening problems, particularly for patients with a suppressed immune system. The union now provides

an ICRA certification for this subspecialty. Any union contractor that has been awarded a renovation contract in a healthcare facility can send its carpenters and apprentices through the ICRA program prior to the start of the job. The CRCC has also created an eight-hour program that educates hospital staff on what to expect during a renovation of an occupied healthcare facility, and what they can do to minimize disruption and particularly cross-contamination of areas.

IS IT RIGHT FOR ME?

There is no single answer to this question, but it is worth asking. We came away impressed with the CRCC efforts and facility. You can learn more at the United Brotherhood of Carpenters website (carpenters.org/home.aspx) or by speaking with a local chapter representative.

Sue and Greg Burnet own Toolbelt Productions (toolbeltproductions.com).