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**Cover Story**  
**Making Connections**

'Career Explorations' Program Works to Introduce Young People to Precision Machining

By *GEORGE O'BRIEN*




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It was just one of many given in shops across the region over the past several years, but the recent tour of Ben Franklin Design & Manufacturing in Agawam by members of the Greater Springfield Boys & Club exemplifies ongoing efforts to build awareness of the precision-machining sector and put workers in the pipeline for the decades to come. It will be years before the many agencies involved with a project called 'Career Explorations' know if their efforts have paid off, but those involved say that much hard work must be done now to secure the long-term viability of this important sector.

The tour started with a look over the shoulder of a process engineer working at his computer to determine the most effective strategies for manufacturing a part destined for a nuclear reactor.

It continued with detailed explanations of what some of the quarter-million-dollar machines on the shop floor do, and how they do it. And it wrapped up in the Quality Control Department, where attendees were told that, in this day and age, precision-machining companies not only make parts, but they inspect them, as well.

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But maybe the highlight of this visit to Ben Franklin Design & Manufacturing in Agawam was a quick stop in the parking lot on the way back to the van. There, Edward Leyden, second-generation owner of the company and current president of the National Tooling & Machining Assoc. (NTMA), pointed out some of the large, seemingly fully loaded pickup trucks, late-model SUVs, and even a few luxury sedans driven by employees.

Leyden's mission was to impress upon the 12- and 13-year-olds just how rewarding a career in precision manufacturing can be, and the parking lot might well have been his most effective vehicle for doing so — literally and figuratively.

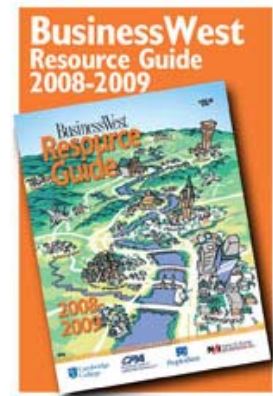
"What we want to do is make a connection with these kids, and that's not very easy to do, so we try to find some common ground," said Leyden, adding that cars, a subject very much on the minds of many teenage boys, has become a way to forge such connections. "We were giving a tour to some kids from Putnam [High School in Springfield] a while back, and a couple of students noticed that there were some nice vehicles in the parking lot. Now, it's part of every tour we give."

On this day, those visiting Ben Franklin and its parking lot were members of the Greater Springfield Boys & Girls Club, and they were there as part of an intriguing program, now in its second year, called 'Career Explorations — Robotics/Precision Manufacturing,' that has a number of initiatives scheduled for the next few months. There will also be a tour of Hoppe Tool in Chicopee, another precision manufacturer; visits to the precision-machining program facilities at Springfield Technical Community College and Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, as well as Putnam High School; and semester-long work with comprehensive robotics kits that will provide valuable lessons in teamwork.

The broad goal, say those involved, is to make precision manufacturing part of the equation when it comes to career considerations — and the selection of a high school — with middle-school students and their parents.

"This industry still has some problems with regard to perception," said Adrienne Smith, dean of the School of Engineering Technologies at Springfield Technical Community College, one of several players involved with the initiative. She noted that many parents still consider manufacturing to be dirty, low-end work that is unstable. "The old perceptions about the machining sector simply are not reality — these are good-paying jobs in clean working environments; our challenge is to make young people and their parents understand this reality."

Career Explorations is part of a much broader effort to do just that — build awareness of careers in manufacturing and convince young people and parents that this is a sector with a future, and, like others, it's a collaborative effort with a number of stakeholders. In this case, the list includes the manufacturing companies (Hoppe and Ben Franklin), STCC and Asnuntuck, the Regional Employment



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Board of Hampden County (REB), the Springfield Boys Club/Carew Hill Girls Club, the Black Men of Greater Springfield, and others.

Such partnerships will be needed if the precision-machining sector is to replace the Baby Boomers set to retire over the next 10 to 15 years and thus remain a vibrant component of the Western Mass. economy for years to come, said David Cruise. He serves as director of Business and Employment Services for REB, and is spearheading a number of initiatives to put workers in the pipeline.

It will perhaps a decade or more before those involved with this project will know if it has succeeded with its basic mission, said Cruise, but the various players know they have to act now and hope their efforts will pay off down the road.

In this issue, BusinessWest looks at the Career Explorations program and how it exemplifies efforts to build awareness of careers in manufacturing, thus creating job opportunities for area young people while stabilizing a still-vibrant business sector.

### **Making Progress**

Leyden told BusinessWest that Ben Franklin conducts probably two dozen tours a year, and he plays the role of guide himself — as other shop owners do — thus offering a clear indication of just how seriously this company is taking the matter of long-term recruitment.

And he acknowledged that some visits go better than others.

"There are days when you wonder if it's all worth it," he said. "I've had bad tours where the children don't behave themselves and they're bored — and to some extent I can understand that. But you have to keep at it, and you have to work on many fronts. Yes, there are some tours that don't exactly go well, but you have to focus on the ones, and there are many of them, where a student says, 'this is very interesting ... I think this is something I'd like to do.'"

A multiple-front approach will be needed, said Leyden, because, by his estimation (and that of many others), this industry did a poor job of selling itself in the '80s and '90s, and it has no choice but to get much better in that capacity. And the tours, he noted, are one of the keys to changing the perceptions that this sector allowed to fester years ago.

Thus, they've become a part of life at Ben Franklin, which in many ways typifies the players in the precision-machining sector. Founded 35 years ago by Leyden's father, Frank DeLapa, it remains a small company (20 employees) that has evolved over the years, shifting from tool- and die-making to creating parts for the aerospace, nuclear-power-generation (the company has the highest safety rating for that sector), medical, and other sectors.

Customers include GE, Westinghouse, Boeing, Sikorsky, and others.

Business is good, said Leyden, noting that the civilian nuclear-power industry is actually seeing a resurgence — six new reactors are in the pipeline — and aerospace and medical instruments remain steady with strong growth potential.

But, like many shops, Ben Franklin is actually turning down work because it simply doesn't have enough skilled workers. "And that's not exactly good for business," said Leyden, "When you have the chance to add work, you have to be able to take advantage of those opportunities."

Meanwhile, the average age of those working on the company's shop floors is 52, said Leyden, noting that he would prefer to be closer to 38 or so.

"That's way higher than it should be or where we want to see it," he told BusinessWest, adding that, with regard to this discrepancy, things are likely to actually get worse before they get any better. "It's going to take a while to reinvigorate this pipeline, and in the meantime, you're bleeding qualified workers. "

This convergence of factors is one of the forces that led to the Feb. 18 tour of the plant that involved six middle-school students from Springfield, all hand-picked because they exhibited at least some interest in the machining field. There were to be more, but two were out of the area for school vacation and another was out with the flu.

Still, said Leyden, the tour was well worth the two hours he invested in it, because he approached it with the attitude that he does all the others — that if he can get just one young person to become intrigued enough to talk with their parents about this industry and its potential and then seriously consider an educational path that will help give them the skills needed to enter the field, then the time and energy will have been good investments.

### **Forging Partnerships**

Cruise told BusinessWest that the primary goal of the field-trip aspect of the program is to show young people the opportunities in this field — and the cars in the parking lot — and then what it will take to get such a job and vehicle.

"We begin with the actual jobs in the field, and then work the students back," he said, noting that the program starts with tours of the plants, and then proceeds with visits to the colleges where students can get associate's degrees that will help them advance in the field. Things wind up in May with a tour of Putnam that is designed to show what amounts to the next important step in the process.

"We're very concerned with middle school students and helping them make the right choice of a high school," Cruise explained. "We believe that's very important to their not only finishing high school but going on beyond that.

We're particularly interested in exposing students to precision manufacturing as a career and selfishly interested in them looking at Putnam as a possible high school of choice."

Smith agreed, and noted that the robotics classes, a new addition to the Career Explorations program and an expanded version of a week-long summer camp in robotics staged at the college, will help in the process of generating interest in that field, and an understanding of how creative and rewarding the work can be.

The comprehensive kits, designed to enable students to take part in engineering-design competitions, stress creativity, said Smith, noting that they are reconfigurable and customizable, and thus provide a wealth of different exercises.

"The agencies collaborating in this project kicked in money to buy these robotics kits (\$1,100 each) because they understand the importance of not merely making young people aware of careers in manufacturing, but getting them engaged in this kind of work," she explained.

By doing so, they can help students see the ways in which they can use math, science, and teamwork to solve problems, reach goals, and, in the process, gain solid career opportunities.

But such work has to begin early, Smith noted, adding that, by the time most students have chosen a high school, they may have made up their minds what they want to do, and then it's often too late.

"If we can get just one person to go down this path, that's one more than we would have had."

If the exercises in robotics and tours to machine shops and colleges succeed in piquing a student's interests, then he or she will tell their parents about it, said Cruise, and this is what really triggers movement and helps the region inch closer to full capacity in its machining programs.

"Parents will call and ask, 'what's this about?'" he said, adding that such calls get the ball moving.

Overall, Leyden said the Career Explorations program and other initiatives to invigorate the pipeline, as he put it, are designed to help young people make smart decisions about their futures. And for some, manufacturing is the smart, common-sense move; the ongoing challenging is convincing them and their parents of this.

"Part of the problem is that you have a lot of students going to college who shouldn't be going to college," he explained, adding that he is careful as he walks a fine line in such discussions. "You don't want to discourage anyone from going to college, but you absolutely don't want to have people who shouldn't go to college go. That's because they end up essentially wasting four years, or they come out early, and they're not very marketable, and there's not

much for them.

"If you at least expose them to other options," he continued, referring to the shop floor at Ben Franklin and places like it, "then they can make an informed decision."

#### **Turn for the Better**

As he wrapped up his tour at Ben Franklin, Leyden asked those in attendance if there were any questions. Upon hearing none, he asked one himself: "anyone want an application?"

He was kidding, of course, but also emphasizing, again, that this is a very serious matter for area shop owners and all those involved with economic development. He and the others invested in this project hope that, in six years or so, maybe one or more of those who gave up a morning during school vacation to tour the plant will indeed take an application and then maybe take a job.

If so, they will help stabilize a sector that Leyden and others say has a bright future. And they will likely also add something to the parking-lot portion of tours given around 2018.

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