



Chambers Truss & Ft. Pierce Central High Partner to "Grow" Technicians

by Libby Maurer

Learn how Chambers found a solution to the lack of qualified truss technicians in a local high school.

Which of these factors can manufacturers control?

- Housing starts
- The weather
- The shortage of skilled truss technicians in the industry
- Being stuck behind a train

If you're wondering why I omitted "e. None of the above," you have good reason to find out about the workforce development program Chambers Truss launched several years ago. In south Florida, there seem to be more component manufacturing operations than Starbucks and McDonald's combined. Placing diligent workers in production jobs in this region hasn't presented nearly the same challenge as filling holes in truss design departments with skilled technicians.

Chambers' solution for beefing up the local labor pool started when a local public high school red-taped field trips. "Because of the liability of transporting students to and from a destination, we weren't allowed to travel," says Todd "Coach" Cash. Undeterred, veteran Ft. Pierce High School drafting teacher Cash walked his students over to Chambers Truss Company for a quick tour.

"That was how the tradition began," says Bob Becht, President of Chambers Truss. "For a while the kids would come over to learn a little about truss design. Then we had the idea to implement a program where they would actually design trusses."

In its sixth year, the program has yielded more than a dozen technician interns and employees for Chambers and other manufacturers servicing the south Florida building market. Although the program wasn't created with the intention of growing

technicians, it was apparent from the beginning that there was an added workforce development benefit, says Scott Evert, Chambers' design department manager.

Coach Cash enthusiastically accepts the challenge of preparing his students to possibly pursue careers in the building components industry. "The number of kids I see on a daily basis who don't have any direction about how to get from the classroom door to a job in the real world is very high," says Cash.

Evert, employed with Chambers since 1984, explains that the students who possess an aptitude for design and don't plan to enroll in tech colleges or four-year universities—like many who sign up for Cash's elective drafting classes—are a perfect fit for the Chambers mold. "The college-bound type generally aspire to go into architecture or a similar field, and don't tend to be true long-term fits for us," he states.

Evert points out that the challenge not only lies in finding skilled technicians; they seem to be a roaming bunch. "There is such a need for skilled technicians in the state that if they're offered \$.50 more per hour at another company, they're gone."

Addressing the country's broader workforce issue, Coach Cash points out, "I think our kids are up against a [largely] nationwide attitude that we don't want them to get their hands dirty." The native Michigander adds, "Our skilled tradesmen are retiring or leaving the workforce at record rates, and we aren't replacing them fast enough. We're also not training our kids in high school."

Based on their experience serving on the curriculum development board, Becht and Evert say vocational training in Florida public high schools is anything but encouraged. But Cash does his level best to mimic the conditions of real-life employment in his classroom. He gives students several weeks of work at a time and allows them to work in a self-paced manner. Cash also encourages them to collaborate when problem-solving. "These kids are very focused, diligent and self-sufficient," he comments.



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Over the course of one semester, Cash's Drafting II and III students simulate a complete home design. This includes creating a site plan, floor plan, window and door schedule, foundation plan, typical wall and truss layout, electrical, HVAC, plumbing, and elevations. Coach Cash typically bases the students' projects off a set of plans he acquired from a Habitat for Humanity home, but on occasion Evert will send Cash a simple home designed and built by Chambers.

When they arrive at the step in the process that includes walls and trusses, these students enjoy the privilege of hands-on truss design. Keeping with tradition, Cash walks his class to Chambers for a brief tour of the plant and a sit-down with Evert, who presents a demonstration of the layout and engineering software used by their technicians. "I show

Continued on page 44

at a glance

- ❑ To address the challenge of finding skilled truss technicians, Chambers Truss has partnered with a local high school.
- ❑ Each semester, Coach Cash's drafting classes learn basic truss design and build a 3D home model.
- ❑ Since it began, the program has yielded many truss technicians for south Florida component manufacturers.



Chambers Truss & Ft. Pierce Central High...
Continued from page 43

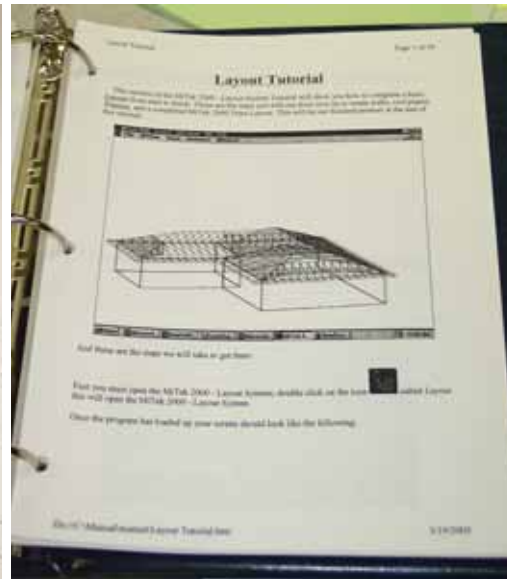
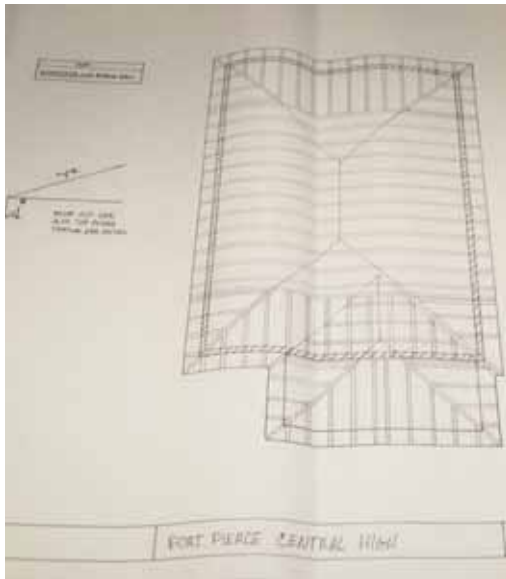
them basic design functions that they can use on the program," explains Evert.

Back in the classroom, students create truss placement plans and truss designs using software licensed from a connector plate manufacturer. During this process, the students reference a tutorial created by one of Cash's students who later became a Chambers technician. Cash's students not only graduate with exposure to the industry, but also with real experience using truss design software.

A bonus at the end of the project is an opportunity to create a 3-D model of their home. The students work in groups, gluing thin sticks of wood together to form the floors, walls and trusses. On one recent occasion, a class had the chance to apply temporary bracing. Through its Safe Truss Partnership program, Chambers invites customers and/or framers working with long-span trusses to learn about proper installation techniques and safety considerations. "We go through BCSI with them and needed a model to demonstrate how the bracing should look," says Becht. He notes that every time the kids set a support, they referenced BCSI B1 and B2.

Evert himself is a critical resource to Cash, making himself available during school hours to answer students' questions as they progress. Evert fields the occasional "how much do you make" query, which recently garnered a laugh.

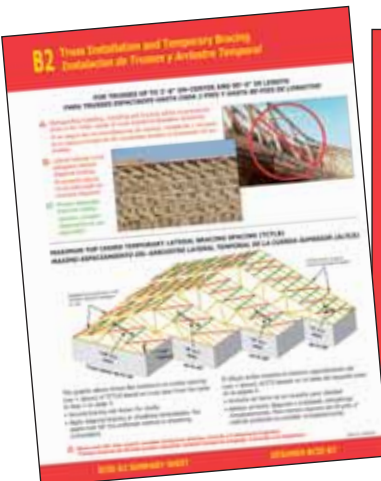
Continued on page 48



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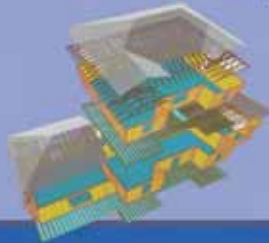


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"Before I could answer, one of the kids said 'he's wearing a Ralph Lauren shirt, how badly could he be doing?'"

Funny as the career world may seem to these students now, each year Coach Cash works with seniors who aren't prepared for life after their diplomas. "Some of these kids don't know how to get to the next step, and they need someone to help them along," he says. Cash thinks teachers—along with parents and others—need to direct kids more in developing their career interests and plans after high school.

For Becht and Evert, the most important part of Cash's class is that the students are introduced to the industry before entering the workforce. "At least they've exposed themselves and know whether it is something they're interested in," Evert says, which is more exposure than most job candidates coming off the street. However, he clarifies that the goal is to allow them the freedom to develop their own interests. "We're not trying to turn them into truss guys."

In the past, Chambers has offered paid summer internships to Cash's students between their junior and senior years. "We hired one of them to do an internship as an estimator. When he graduated, he was brought on full time to make cut lists," Becht says. Another former drafting student currently works as a truss technician for Chambers. A dozen or so additional students have been placed at Space Coast Truss and A-1 Building Components.

Cash hopes to feed more candidates to local truss companies in the future. "As I build better relationships with the companies, I just get on the phone and ask what their needs are," he says. Cash notes that since he's worked with the students for several years, he feels comfortable recommending them.

While the program is a small-scale solution for an issue with national implications, it seems to be working for south Florida. Becht credits Cash with having the patience and interest in his students to encourage them to think seriously about their futures. "He's trying to do something with these kids, and talks to them about how real life is," he notes.

With his bird's-eye view of what works and what doesn't in terms of finding and keeping skilled technicians, Evert says there's no substitute for early exposure to the trade. "What we're trying to do is introduce them to [the industry] and find out if they're interested," says Evert.

While it's not clear whether Chambers has developed a long-term solution to the industry's workforce development challenge, it seems that high school training programs can help to at least spread awareness about the numerous career options offered by the industry. Cash could use the help; he's up for retirement in a few years. **SBC**

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