

Youngsters get boots-on-ground look at local jobs | Anthony Westbury

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"Bookwork is not my style."

"I'm not book-smart, I prefer working with my hands."

Yes, college isn't for everyone, as Steven Wood and Slater Price told me, respectively, Tuesday.

In fact, only one third of U.S. high school graduates finish college. So what happens to the other two-thirds? Many go to work in jobs that don't require a degree and many of those pay better, to boot.

I got to meet 20 recent high school grads during a tour of Hi-Tide Boat Lifts on Selvitz Road in Fort Pierce. The 19 boys and one girl were taking part in a week-long Ready to Work Boot Camp



organized by the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County.

Members of the group made it abundantly clear they preferred to work with their hands rather than hitting the books.

Hi-Tide co-owner Kara Wood told the group only two of the company's 41 employees have degrees, so

they'd be in good company. That includes her brother, Craig, who grew up in marine construction working alongside their father.

After graduating from Martin County High School and attending University of Florida for two years, Craig Wood said he realized "I hated being inside and that I could make more money with a (construction) license than a degree."

Hi-Tide builds mostly aluminum boat lifts for vessels ranging from Jet Skis to yachts and weighing between 5,000 and 10,000 pounds. So far this year, the company has sold more than 700 lifts, most of them to recreational boaters. Typically, Hi-Tide builds about 1,600 lifts a year.

Craig Wood kept stressing that the secret of the company's success is teamwork. During a tour of the plant we saw employees cutting, shaping and welding the lift structures. Each worker quietly and steadily completed his part of the overall assembly. The atmosphere was friendly and collegial.

The easy-going style at Hi-Tide translates to long tenures, company president Carlos Quinones said. About one third of the workforce has been with the company at least eight years, and the shop foreman and production manager have been there twice that long.

Steven Wood (no relation to the company owners), 18, is interested in welding. He hopes to go into automotive work, yet he was impressed with Hi-Tide.

"The company really seems to know what they're doing," Steven Wood said. "Working here would definitely be interesting. They have a good reputation, they build unique products and they have a lot of pride in their work. They seem to genuinely care for their workers."

Slater Price, 18, of Port St. Lucie, thought "it was pretty cool today. It was a little too much metal working for me. I'm looking forward to going to Pursuit Boats later in the week. I really like the beach and being on boats. Southern Eagle Distributing (which the group toured on Monday) was pretty awesome, too. It was very friendly and welcoming. A cool place to work."

The tour was part of the county's first five-day Ready to Work Manufacturing Boot Camp that's designed to prepare high school graduates for immediate high-demand careers. The group visited Silver-Line Plastics, Southern Eagle Distributing, Phoenix Metal Products, Walmart Distribution Center and Pursuit Boats.

Students were hand-selected by their school guidance counselors, some of whom took a similar tour last year to learn about the needs of local manufacturers.

The idea for the boot camp arose out of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County's 2017 Skills Gap Initiative and the Workforce Readiness Task Force, which works to bridge the gap between the region's current workforce skills and those that will be needed by area employers in the future.

"This is the precursor to working more closely with vocational education in St. Lucie County schools and with manufacturers," said Pete Tesch, president of the EDC. "We're linking the world of the classroom with the world of work. And it's all privately funded."

Nationally, U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics suggest a growing demand and faltering supply of skilled manufacturing workers.

"There are many pathways to success (in life)," Tesch went on. "(Often in the past) counselors were heavily pushing the college pathway. I hope we're enlightening them about local opportunities in manufacturing."

I was impressed by the thoughtful and articulate group I met Tuesday. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are driven to succeed.

I think our future's in good hands — literally.

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