

# Stay the course

## Area firms hire 65 Crawford Tech students

By Mike Crowley

MEADVILLE TRIBUNE

Standing on stage in front of more than 200 friends, family members and community dignitaries, Chase Blake felt pretty good as he signed his name on a letter of intent to accept a position with Corry Manufacturing Co. following his completion of the welding program at Crawford Tech in a few weeks.

The reason behind the positive feelings was clear, he explained a moment after he descended from the stage inside the Meadville Area Senior High auditorium.

"I'm going to have a pretty good job for the future," the Maplewood Junior-Senior High senior said. Part of what makes it a good job, he added, is the good pay that comes with it. And looking about five years down the road, Blake already has an idea of where he would like to be.

"I hope to stay in the same job," he said.



SHANNON ROAE/Meadville Tribune

**Tim Pondel, welding supervisor at Corry Manufacturing, shakes hands with Maplewood senior Chase Blake during Crawford Tech's signing day on Wednesday afternoon at Meadville Area Senior High.**

Blake, who was joined onstage by Marshal Pike, vice president of Corry Manufacturing, and welding supervisor Tim Pondel, expects to start as a TIG welder late next month.

Tungsten inert gas (TIG) welding uses a tungsten electrode to

deliver the current that creates the welding arc while an inert gas like argon to protect the process from atmospheric contamination, according to The Welding Institute.

Or as Blake explained it, TIG welding is "the more difficult type of welding."

Blake was among 65 Crawford Tech seniors signing on with area firms Wednesday during the school's sixth annual signing day event. The seniors, accompanied by one or two representatives of the businesses

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hiring them, crossed the auditorium stage one by one to a ceremonial lectern in the center where they and their soon-to-be employers signed on the proverbial dotted line.

The moment was weighty with symbolism, coming at the cusp between high school and professional life and in front of parents and officials who applauded after each new signature. What could have passed as just another mundane part of everyday life in-

stead was put in the spotlight, highlighting the significance of the commitment for not only employer and employee but the larger community.

Such moments belong in the spotlight, according to Judd Pittman, director of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Bureau of Career and Technical Education, who was a guest speaker at the event.

For Pittman, the moment represented the continuing relevancy of a well-known Pennsylvanian interested in career education. Ben Franklin, Pittman reminded the audience, told 18th-century res-

idents, "He that hath a trade hath an estate."

"This sets you and your family up for landing that family-sustaining wage that provides the estate that the innovator Ben Franklin discussed," Pittman said. "The secret of career and technical education is out. It is no longer a secret. It is what folks are choosing to put themselves on a path to that family-thriving wage."

Data from Crawford Tech offered support for Pittman's case: In addition to wait-lists for programs like welding and automotive technology, the school expects to have nearly 550 students enrolled in the fall — the highest number in at least 18 years, according to school officials.

This year, the school's newest programs — HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) technology, sports medicine and veterinary sciences — will graduate their first seniors. Next year the three remaining two-year programs — carpentry, electrical occupations and health

occupations — will expand to three years.

The students and their families are not the only beneficiaries of their successful launch into the world of adulthood, according to state Sen. Michele Brooks, who also spoke at the ceremony.

"I just love today and I love today not only as a state senator but as a mom," Brooks said. "Because I look out at these kids, as we celebrate your accomplishments, I am just so proud and so thankful that as you begin a new journey in life that you're beginning it here at home — that you're investing in your communities and you're investing in our local economy and our local businesses."

The businesses hiring Crawford Tech students are also investing in both the students and the communities in which they are a part, Brooks added.

This year, 52 businesses made such an investment, including well known local institutions such as Meadville Medical Center and Acutec

Precision Aerospace Inc.; national chains with a local presence such as AutoZone Auto Parts, Red Lobster and Dunkin'; and a wide variety of small businesses including car dealerships, tool and die shops, construction companies and more.

Hiring local tech school graduates is a good investment, according to Pike, who paused a moment with Blake after the two had signed the letter of intent onstage.

"It's very advantageous to be able to take kids from a votech program where they've already had some learning," said Pike, himself a 1998 graduate of Cory Career and Technical Center. "A lot of them can skip secondary school, come in and we'll take the time to train them and get them on their way."

"It saves us time and money in training," Pondel agreed. "Some of our best welders are quite young that come out of these programs."

Crawford Tech and other area schools provide an important source of labor, ac-

ording to Keith Taylor, vice president of manufacturing for Greenleaf Corp. in Saegertown. Taylor accompanied Saegertown Junior-Senior High senior Kaylee King across the stage.

Starting this summer, King will be making inserts for cutting tools. Like Blake, she said the pay is "pretty good," and she saw herself following similar plan for the near future: "Staying with Greenleaf," she said.

Taylor, holding the black yard sign boasting, "We hired a Crawford 'Tech' graduate," that was handed to each employer who crossed the stage, found reason for optimism in the annual event that has quickly become a tradition.

"Right now, business is growing pretty significantly," Taylor said. "I'm encouraged by the high school graduates that we've hired here recently in the past couple of years."

*Mike Crowley can be reached at (814) 724-6370 or by email at mcrowley@meadvilletribune.com.*

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