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RCBI announces new initiatives to meet manufacturing worker shortage

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After enrolling in a fast-track machinist training program at the Robert C. Byrd Institute (RCBI) Robinette, a U.S. Air Force veteran, decided to start his own metalworking business in Huntington. He also recently persuaded two friends, both Army veterans, to enroll in RCBI's Military to Manufacturing program. They, too, have established their own manufacturing operations.

RCBI | Courtesy photos

HUNTINGTON — During the pandemic, Tad Robinette, a U.S. Air Force veteran and former Los Angeles Police Department patrol officer, was looking for something to occupy his time. Consequently, he decided to enroll in a fast-track machinist training program at RCBI.

“You can’t tell someone like me you’re going to give me all of this high-tech training and you’re not going to charge me for it,” said Robinette, whose training was covered under RCBI’s military pre-apprenticeship program. “I immediately said, ‘Sign me up.’”

After the initial 100 hours of hands-on instruction, Robinette returned to RCBI for 40 hours of even more advanced training, driving to Huntington nearly every day from his home in Kanawha County.

Robinette recently parlayed his new-found skills into a business, establishing his own metalworking operation — Liberty Hill Company. The Kanawha County resident landed his first contract after RCBI connected him with another West Virginia manufacturer seeking to subcontract production of precision parts.

Using the shared manufacturing model in which RCBI supplies the equipment and expertise while clients provide an operator and raw materials, Robinette set about producing 600 airflow diverters used in the energy sector. He quickly realized that traditional manufacturing of the parts one at a time on a computer-controlled mill was time-consuming — and eating into his profits.

Robinette had an idea for a jig — a specialized device to hold the metal being machined and guide the tools shaping it, which would allow him to produce multiple parts at once, reducing machine setups and changeouts. He had met design engineer Morgan Smith while he was training at RCBI.

“Just a few steps away was a guy who could take my idea and turn it into a three-dimensional object,” Robinette explained.

Smith produced 3-D renderings of Robinette's design and then 3D-printed prototypes for testing. After adjustments, Robinette machined the jig from aluminum, allowing him to produce multiple parts simultaneously.

"This enabled me to make 20 parts at a time, turning raw material into components worth hundreds of dollars in minutes, not only cutting my cost to manufacture but increasing productivity and production," he said.

Robinette said Smith's expertise also resulted in additional cost savings.

"Morgan was able to calculate the forces the jig would undergo," he said. "By determining the tensile strength required of the piece, he concluded that I could manufacture the part from aluminum rather than more expensive steel, saving additional money.

"RCBI is a one-stop shop for everything you need, from training to design engineering to production assistance," Robinette said. "The model created here clearly works. I'm proof of that."

Officials with the Robert C. Byrd Institute (RCBI) in Huntington say they can't produce machinists and welders fast enough to meet industry demand.

"That's why we're expanding our programs and developing new initiatives to train more manufacturing workers more quickly," said Mike Friel, RCBI's director of communication.

The Robert C. Byrd Institute at Marshall University is a manufacturing technology center whose mission is to encourage job creation, economic development, innovation and entrepreneurship by supporting manufacturing companies of all sizes. Its training programs help students learn the skills necessary to achieve nationally recognized certifications and earn college credits toward an associate degree along the way.

Derek Scarbro, RCBI deputy director and director of business development, said current efforts include expanding the machinist technology/CNC program by opening a new facility at 100 Angus E. Peyton Drive in South Charleston.

“We are in the process of opening and anticipate opening by Labor Day,” Scarbro said.

The South Charleston location will offer the same machinist training offered in Huntington but on a much bigger scale, according to Scarbro.

“We will be working to partner with local community colleges there as a pathway for individuals to do training through our fast track program, as well as short term training,” he said. “We will also offer training for current manufacturing employees to get up-skilled or cross-trained in different skill sets. We offer flexible training for students to come in for hands-on training that we can customize for companies at our facility or their facility.”

RCBI now offers students the option of completing its two-year program in 18 months.

“It’s being offered in our machinist technology/CNC program,” Scarbro said. “We hope to be able to work toward offering it in our welding program in the future.”

Students take summer classes and extra classes throughout the year to be able to graduate sooner.

“Many students are taking advantage of this and getting to work sooner,” he said.

RCBI is also launching a new class of RecoveryWorks, its initiative to train formerly incarcerated individuals for jobs in manufacturing.

“That will launch on June 8 and we currently have nine individuals interested and we are still in the process of enrolling more,” Scarbro said. “The free four-week educational program is open to individuals in West Virginia, Ohio and Kentucky who are interested in exploring career opportunities in manufacturing.”

Participants receive hands-on machinist training in the operation of computer-numerical-controlled (CNC) mills and lathes, coupled with classroom and online instruction in blueprint reading, mathematics, precision measurement, computer-aided design and safety.

Scarbro said an \$8-per-hour stipend is paid upon completion of the program and funding is also available to assist with travel. There is also peer counseling to support emotional development, especially as it relates to maintaining sobriety or dealing with family and friends struggling with addiction.

“RecoveryWorks provides a structured pathway for workforce re-entry,” said Carol Howerton, RCBI senior strategic advisor for workforce development. “Participants must be affected by the opioid epidemic in some way, either in recovery themselves or dealing with or having dealt with family or friends struggling with substance use disorder.”

RCBI partners with support organizations and private industry to deliver a holistic approach that better prepares individuals for finding and maintaining a job, Howerton said.

Marshall University’s Creating Opportunities for Recovery Employment (CORE) program and Catholic Charities West Virginia help identify candidates for the program and provide counseling and soft-skills training.

Scarbro said RCBI also created a military to manufacturing program to help veterans and transitioning military personnel for jobs as computer-controlled machine operators or start their own manufacturing business.

“It started earlier this year,” he said. “It’s short-term, 100-hour, five-week manufacturing training course about half online and half with equipment and staff. Often there is no cost to the veteran.”

“Manufacturers across our region have openings for machinists,” Howerton said. “This program will increase the talent pipeline while creating job opportunities. Veterans tend to make great machinists because of the discipline they learned in the military as well as

attention to detail and follow-through that is required. Employers consistently tell us they like to hire veterans because they're dependable."

RCBI offers the program in partnership with Mountwest Community and Technical College. Participants in the 60-hour training course will receive hands-on instruction in the operation of CNC (computer numerical control) mills and lathes as well as blueprint reading, precision measuring and safety with supplemental online training through Tool U-SME.

Howerton said no experience is necessary. Financial assistance is available through the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment Program and scholarships through Mountwest.

Scarbro said RCBI has opened a kiosk at the Huntington Mall to let more people know about training options for these in-demand occupations.

"It's just off the Center Court and offers information about our training programs," he said. "It will be open until June 15."

West Virginia added 300 manufacturing jobs each in March and April and 1,200 in the past year, according to Workforce West Virginia.

"Nucor, Green Power Motor Company and others have promised to bring at least 1,500 manufacturing jobs to southern West Virginia in the next couple of years," Friel said. "We know from talking to companies' representatives that among the workers they need are welders and machinists."

Friel says RCBI's B2BWV website provides manufacturers a free, convenient platform on which to advertise job openings and individuals an up-to-date list of available positions.

"Our students are in great demand," said Charlotte Weber, RCBI director and CEO. "More than 95% find employment in their chosen occupations, many even before they graduate. At RCBI we're proud to educate and prepare individuals for good-paying jobs while meeting industry demand for skilled workers."