

Training For A Turnaround

Homeless Vets Hope Learning Trade Will Bring Them New Start

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MANCHESTER -- At the controls of a computer-operated milling machine, John Williams, a burly, tattooed Army veteran, is back in college, not only learning a new trade - but turning his life around.

"This is pointing me in the right direction," said the 37-year-old Williams, a high school and college dropout who battled drug addiction and spent time in prison before enrolling in a small precision machining class at Manchester Community College.

Most of the nine students in the class are here for a second chance. Some have been laid off. Others are in dead-end jobs. Williams and three others are homeless former servicemen from the state Veterans' Home in Rocky Hill.

Job training is a key element in efforts to build new lives for homeless veterans, who, by some estimates, make up nearly one-fourth of all homeless people in the nation and one-third of homeless men, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans in Washington.

In Connecticut, nearly 4,700 veterans are homeless, according to a 2005 survey by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

At Manchester Community College, the four veterans are enrolled in a class that includes reading blueprints, brushing up on math and working on milling machines, lathes and surface grinders. They have been eager learners, said Richard Dwire, the instructor for the 28-week course in the college's Precision Manufacturing Institute.

"I wish I had more like them," he said. "These guys ... are really good."

Dwire is confident that the state's shrinking manufacturing sector still is a good place to land jobs.

Although Connecticut, like other states, has lost manufacturing jobs in recent years, there is still a substantial demand for workers to replace an aging and retiring workforce of machinists, labor experts say. The market for skilled machinists is strong enough that community colleges across the state are expanding training programs.

"Right now," Dwire said, "all nine of my [students] could be hired. ... A lot of places are hurting. They just can't get people."

Not long ago, Williams wondered whether anyone would hire him.

After growing up in Milford, he dropped out of high school at age 16 and joined the Army at 17. He got a GED high school diploma during basic training and in the late 1980s was stationed in Germany. He returned to Connecticut and got married in 1989, but his marriage fell apart two years later. As Williams tells it, that began a downward spiral that would last for much of the next decade and a half.

When his wife and daughter left, "I just lost it," he said. He began drinking heavily and, within a year, was using drugs. A heroin addiction, he said, led to an arrest for theft. After serving a prison term, he enrolled in courses at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, dropping out in less than a semester. He held odd jobs - moving appliances, painting houses, working in a print shop - but relapsed into drug abuse, stole a truck and wound up in prison again.

He was released three years ago but couldn't get a job. "Even a carwash wouldn't hire me," he said.

By then, again using heroin, he checked himself into a psychiatric unit operated by the VA in West Haven. He lived briefly in a homeless shelter before being transferred to the Veterans' Home, where he has lived for most of the past two years and has been free of drugs, he said.

"This place," he said, "has given me my life back."

It was a Veterans' Home vocational counselor who told him about the machining program. The tuition, \$5,000, comes from a scholarship from The Workplace Inc., a Bridgeport-based agency that runs job-training and education programs, including efforts to help veterans get counseling, housing and jobs.

After being contacted by the community college last year, officials at The Workplace felt the machining program would be a good fit for the veterans.

Williams, along with three others from the Veterans' Home in Rocky Hill, signed up.

"I'm pretty good with computers," Williams said. In math, "I'm fairly good. My trigonometry is kind of iffy. It's been 20-some years since I've been in high school."

Through an internship in the noncredit course, he already has landed a part-time job, working two to three hours a day at Flanagan Industries, a Glastonbury company that makes engine parts for commercial and military aircraft.

"He was very honest and up front with me about his past," said Michael Flanagan, the company's vice president and general manager. "I'm a veteran myself, nine years in the Marine Corps. ... I told him I'll take a chance on most anybody."

Williams is learning to work on machines such as a vertical turret lathe, Flanagan said.

"He seems to be a bright individual and willing to put forth the effort needed. ... I have every reason to believe he's going to succeed in his endeavor here. I'm looking forward to the day we can hire him full-time."

Others in the machining class, too, hope for full-time work.

"They're motivated," Arlene "Cookie" Melito, coordinator of the Precision Manufacturing

Institute, said of the homeless veterans. "They've seen the darker side of life."

One of the veterans, Jim Quinn, 48, was an Army sergeant in the 1970s. He has held odd jobs, such as handling stock at an outlet store, but said, "I'm hoping to get something long-term, some kind of future. The class has been good."

Dwire, who has taught machining courses nearly 10 years at Manchester after a long career at Pratt & Whitney, takes satisfaction working with the veterans.

"At least I feel I'm helping a group that really appreciates it," said Dwire, himself a former sergeant in the Connecticut Air National Guard. "I like this, just to see what happens, what they end up with. ... In the end, it's still up to them."

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