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First Honors

Construction career days expose hundreds of students to skilled trades



Photo Courtesy | Kentucky Construction Career Choice Council

Students waited to operate an excavator at the Kentucky Construction Career Days last month.

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When Mac Crawford started his Lexington-based construction company Crawford Builders Inc. 42 years ago, the construction industry was vastly different than it is today, even in terms of public perception.

“When I was a young person, my father and mother told me to go to school and get an education, don’t work with my hands and my back, work with your mind and get a good job,” he said. “That, in my opinion, is what is wrong with our society today.”

Crawford said that in today’s economy, even college graduates can have difficulty finding good jobs. But in the construction industry, he said, skilled plumbers, electricians, mechanics and project managers are highly sought, not only to replace older workers soon to retire but also to operate and maintain increasingly high-tech construction equipment, such as bulldozers that now are laser-guided for precision.

Jobs are available, the work is crucial in keeping communities up and running, and the pay is good, he said.

Crawford is past chairman and current member of both the [Homebuilders Association of Kentucky](#) and the Kentucky Construction Career Choice Council. The latter group, also known as K4C, is composed of volunteers who represent various facets of the state’s construction industry and work collectively to promote the field to a potential work force.

Hands-on event

As part of that effort, K4C has sponsored an event for nine years at the Shelby County Fairgrounds called Kentucky Construction Career Days. The free event is open to any high school student who wants to learn more about construction-related careers by talking to exhibitors who represent construction and utilities industries and technical colleges across the commonwealth.

Students can view heavy equipment, try out simulators and participate in highway construction, carpentry, electrical, plumbing, masonry, utility and welding activities.

This year’s event, held Sept. 24 and 25, had a record attendance of 2,400 students. [Lora Werner](#), member services director for the Homebuilders Association of Kentucky and K4C board secretary, said 63 exhibitors participated.

The career days event was formed as an initiative of the association’s work force development committee and has continued to grow, Werner said. About nine months of each year are spent planning the event, and typically about 40 school districts are represented among attendees.

Three years ago, a similar event in Western Kentucky was created to expose students in that part of the state to construction career choices, and this year’s event was held Sept. 19 on the Murray State University campus as a partnership between the university and the Associated General Contractors of Western Kentucky.

Most students who attend these events already are involved in some sort of technical studies at their respective high schools and/or are members of organizations such as [SkillsUSA](#), which also has a goal of cultivating a skilled future work force among today’s students, Werner said.

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The Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Career and Technical Education assists by distributing information about each year's event to teachers, who then help students register.

Bus transportation is provided to the fairgrounds, and students each receive safety glasses and a hard hat for safety during the event and as a reminder of their experience, she said.

"I think it's just an exciting event to show students what's available to them in the construction industry and let them actually have some hands-on experiences with it," Werner said.

"You can read a lot in a textbook, but you can get in there and get dirty for a few minutes, have the control in your hand — and that can make a big difference."

Job possibilities

[Tristan Longacre](#), 17, is a senior at Fairdale High School who has attended five Construction Career Days events since his freshman year, including attending both days this year.

While at the Shelby County event, he talked to an exhibitor with the Louisville-Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District who asked for his résumé, and Longacre is excited at the possibilities.

"I could possibly have a job waiting on me when I get out of high school," he said.

Longacre and other Fairdale students have practiced using a backhoe, skid steers and mini excavators as part of their construction-related studies and SkillsUSA participation at the event, learning from using real-world equipment and simulators.

[Shayna Luttrell](#), a 17-year-old senior at Russell County High School who takes technical classes at Lake Cumberland Area Technology Center, attended her first Construction Career Days this year, in Shelbyville, and was pleasantly surprised at its offerings.

"It was more than I thought," she said. "It let me actually look into more what I was wanting to go into for college and stuff. I was wanting to go into industrial engineering ... robotics and hydraulics and all that."

At the event, Luttrell said, she spoke with [Daren Thompson](#) about her career goals. Thompson is flood protection supervisor for the Louisville Metro Sewer District and is the 2012-13 Construction Career Days chairman.

Since January 2013, he has been chairman of the board of the Kentuckiana Construction Users Council, another partner in the career days event.

As evidence of future needs in the construction field that students such as Luttrell and Longacre can help to fill, Thompson said that in the next decade in Jefferson County alone, \$850 million in construction projects will need to be completed to replace aging infrastructure and comply with changing governmental regulations.

He said he is encouraged by the levels of participation in both the Shelby County and Western Kentucky career days. The latter has had about 1,000 students attend in the three years since its inception, and about 2,000 attend Shelby County's each year, on average.

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“It’s really exciting,” he said. “We’ve really raised awareness in the construction-related fields and that is to our benefit.”

Partnership is a ‘natural fit’

SkillsUSA Kentucky is another partnering organization, promoting the career days event to its more than 5,000 members and providing funding for safety glasses given to participants, said [Fran Dundon](#), Kentucky business and industry director for the group.

SkillsUSA, with the involvement of business, industry, apprenticeship and unions, serves teachers and high school and college students who are preparing for careers in trade, technical and skilled-service occupations.

“It’s a natural fit for all of us to work together, and we have formed mutually beneficial partnerships that provide successful outcomes for everyone,” Dundon said. “It’s working. This year, the K4C Construction Career Days event had more registered students than ever before.”

[Robby Arrasmith](#), senior project manager for [Messer Construction’s](#) Lexington region, has attended the events in 2011 and 2012 and is on the K4C advisory council that helped plan this year’s event. The company is also an annual exhibitor.

“To be able to touch that big of an audience is to me huge, in order to get future candidates into the construction industry.”

He said those potential workers will be needed even more as the economy continues to rebound, bringing new construction projects. Crawford’s wife, [Terri Crawford](#), and son, Chip Crawford, also make a living working for his construction company. And even after 42 years, it’s a job he personally enjoys.

“I get up every day, enjoying going to work,” he said. “Not everybody can say that.”