On the Road to a New Career
From Nairobi, Kenya... to a Welding Lab

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SPOON RIVER COLLEGE
The Diesel and Power Systems Technology program – originally called Farm Machine Technology – has been offering classroom education combined with hands-on learning experience for the past 50 years. A curriculum that has kept pace with ever-changing technology and graduates who are successfully employed have contributed to its longevity, but the people behind the program have also had a hand in its success.

Former instructor Brian Telander is one of those people. He began teaching in 1967 – back in the days when instructors had to go hunt for old engines to use – until he retired in 1998, and he is as passionate about the program now as he was then.

“Although Brian had a Master of Education degree and teaching experience, he didn’t have as much hands-on experience compared to the other instructors,” said Owen. “But he brought an excellent teaching philosophy to the program, and it soon earned him the respect of everyone. I truly believe his influence on the program in the early days contributed greatly to its success, then and now.”

Telander’s concept of education was simple: teach students the principle – the fundamentals of how and why something works – so they can apply that knowledge to the practical. Current instructor Todd Thompson (A.G.S. ’01) practices that same concept, calling it the “everything is easy if you understand it” theory.

Telander and Thompson also agree that the required internship component is a key to the success of the program and the graduates. “We partner with more than 120 employers throughout the region who provide students with job experience while they are learning, and full-time jobs once they graduate,” said Thompson.

Thompson now teaches alongside Joe Clemens (A.A.S. ’97, B.S. ’99) and Aaron Mayall (A.A.S. ’94), who were both students under Owen (Clemens remembers Owen “ruining my perfect GPA by giving me my only B!”). Like Thompson, who had 25 years’ experience in running his own service shop and Owen, who had three years in the Navy and years of mechanic experience before he started teaching, Clemens and Mayall also bring “real world” working experience to the program along with their teaching abilities.

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Khalil Caldwell began taking online business courses at the start of his college career, but soon felt it was the wrong path at the wrong time, so he Googled “high-paying jobs that don’t require a college degree,” and welding popped up.

“It was love at first weld.”

“Welding reminds me of life. You have to look back on your weld to find where you have made mistakes before going forward and doing it correctly,” Caldwell said. “Life is the same way.”

Wise words from one so young, but Caldwell isn’t your average 22-year-old.

Born in Nairobi, Kenya while his mother was teaching there, Caldwell is well-traveled, enjoys it and intends to continue traveling. With an Alabama move already planned, he liked the idea of quickly learning a marketable skill.

“Teaching was the fun part,” said Owen, who was honored by the College with the Distinguished Retiree Award in 2015. “I went to school to earn a trade, not to be a teacher, but it turns out that was the smartest thing I ever did. I was lucky to work with instructors like Brian and also Jesse Bradshaw and Ed Kaiser. Those guys taught me a lot.”

On May 14, Spoon River College will hold its 55th Commencement at Cuba High School. Telander will be there, proudly watching as grandson Dylan walks across the stage to receive his Associate in Applied Science degree.

“I couldn’t be any prouder,” said Telander.

Both Telander and Owen ventured out on the shop floor during their visit, talking with students and offering advice on projects in progress, proof that once a teacher, always a teacher.

The SRC welding program offers two certificate options: an 8 credit-hour program that teaches engineering graphics, introduction to welding, and MIG welding. A 16 credit-hour program offers engineering graphics, applied mathematics, advanced Arc welding, MIG, and TIG welding.

And while Caldwell sings the praises of welding instructor Mark Coulter – “I feel lucky to have an instructor with 40 years of welding experience.” – Coulter is singing Caldwell’s praises. “This kid is incredible.

He is already a master at welding. He’ll be an engineer someday.”

When – and if – Caldwell jumps back on the business track, he sees another plus side to welding. “My mom is an artist, and I also have that artistic motivation. Welding is an art form that I truly enjoy. I like creating cool things, especially if they can be put to practical use.”
Monica Kinhoun of Industry knew she wanted to be a truck driver when she was 16, even though “all the males in my family kept telling me I couldn’t do that.”

Eleven years later, Kinhoun is finally in the driver’s seat, thanks to the College’s Commercial Driver Training (CDT) program.

A love of driving and a fascination with semi-trucks led to Kinhoun’s career decision, but she admits to one other reason.

“The money,” said Kinhoun.

Vicky Walter, who along with husband Bob teaches the CDT program, said she understands Monica’s decision. “It’s the same reason I started driving a truck more than 20 years ago,” said Vicky.

“Here’s the thing: in just four weeks, a person can gain the skills needed to start earning $30,000 - $35,000 a year driving locally, and $35,000 - $45,000 a year if driving over the road,” Vicky said. “Experienced OTR drivers can make much more than that.”

Kinhoun opted for the 4-week program (10 credit hours), which will prepare her to test for a commercial driver’s license (CDL). A 15-week program (17 credit hours) that gives additional instruction and requires an internship is also available. Curriculum includes hazardous materials training, Department of Transportation federal regulations, logging, trip planning, and extensive hands-on driving.

Pell Grants, MAP grants, and Stafford loans cannot be used for the CDT program, but grants are available through Career Link, Illinois Veteran and National Guard, Illinois Department of Human Services, Illinois Migrant Council, and Workforce Investment, which Kinhoun received.

“That paid for the tuition, my coveralls, gloves, boots, everything I needed in order to take these classes,” said Kinhoun.

Dale Young, Chip Windsor, and retired WIU professor Dr. Dan Sigwart join Bob and Vicky in training future drivers.

“Between us we have more than 100 years of driving experience, plus Dan brings his years of teaching occupational safety,” Bob said.

Kinhoun’s first time driving was “harder than I imagined. I had never driven a clutch before, but I loved it! Vicky stayed calm and talked me right through it,” she said.

Eventually Kinhoun hopes to be an owner/operator and dreams of having her own trucking company staffed with women drivers. But for now, she’s just taking it one mile at a time.