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Dean Mattson, two Colorado school districts and generous support from the wood industry have created a state-of-the-art training center to produce the next generation of woodworkers.
By Jennifer Hicks

ANSWERING THE CALL

The training center will treat young people like customers who need to be taught what is in it for them, he stressed. “While some may have not had any goals, they now have a passion,” Mattson said. “And some without a family now have this as their family.”

FILLING A NEED

In an interview with Woodshop News, Mattson explained that the wood industry asked him to take on the challenge of creating the first national training center to fill the skills gap and the hundreds of thousands job openings that will be created when the Baby Boomers’ generation retires.

“With the help of other business, education and industry visionaries, we realized that the first MiLL would be the model that could be duplicated worldwide. Public education needed to reinstall Career and Technical Education back into high schools and colleges. That is why we had to write a new curriculum and will be training teachers how to teach it at the Mill’s Teaching Academy. These students can then enroll into Mills located throughout the nation for advance education and be certified by the Woodwork Career Alliance,” says Mattson.

Dreaming was only part of the equation. Mattson was selected for this challenge by his colleagues because of his wealth of experience in education and woodworking, and tenacity to make things happen from a business perspective.

Originally from Salem, Ore., Mattson founded the cabinetmaking company Mattson’s Interiors, which operated from 1998 to 2009. Having been affected by the lack of a skilled workforce, he signed on to improve the woodworking program at North Salem High School as its CTE instructor. Nearly three-quarters of the district’s students received free and reduced lunches, and over 20 percent were homeless. Mattson created a 125,000-sq.-ft. CTE facility that generated income from student work. A partnership with Stiles Machinery provided generous machinery donations. The program produced 3,000 skilled workers in six years. Mattson was recognized with the Educator of the Year award in 2013 from the Woodworking Machinery Industry Association.

In 2015, Peyton (Colo.) School District superintendent Tim Kistler asked Mattson to create a similar program. There was a vacant middle school, which Mattson transformed into a Woods Manufacturing Lab.



Loud cheers and rounds of applause amplified the main floor of the new ‘MiLL’ training center in Colorado Springs, Colo., during the grand opening event on Oct. 5. The crowd of about 300 included students and their parents, teachers, partner company representatives and educators. The highlight was the moving speech delivered by the man who spearheaded the project, Dean Mattson.

“You asked us to build you a training center and we did,” Mattson said.

The MiLL, an acronym for the Manufacturing Industry Learning Lab, is a national training center supporting the future of education in the wood manufacturing industry. The purpose of the 46,000-sq.-ft. facility is to provide much-needed training and certification in the woods manufacturing and construction industries and serve as a model for other districts. Featuring about \$3 million in donated machinery, tools and technology, students and educators will follow the new Career and Technical Education (CTE) woods manufacturing curriculum, finalized this year.

Fueled by Mattson’s enthusiastic, forward thinking philosophy, and support from all corners of the industry, the center officially opened in August with over 100 students enrolled. The center is prepared to train post-secondary and college students, instructors, veterans and others.

“One hundred twenty days ago, this building was empty. You think about how slow some organizations move and how fast others do. That would be lighting speed, 120 days. I don’t know exactly how many people have been working on this but there have been literally hundreds of people that made this happen,” Mattson told the crowd.

He said several times, “We don’t take no for an answer.”

PHOTOS: BRIAN PAYNE/REDUX PLUS



After the Widefield School District in Colorado Springs joined the effort, Stiles Machinery and other industry partners have filled most of the space with donations of machinery, tools and technology.

STUDENTS REACT

Four students from Peyton High School, who had a hand in building a large reception desk for the MiLL, spoke to Woodshop News about their enthusiastic introduction to the program in 2014.

"They gave us a speech telling us what they were doing. I picked the class thinking it was going to be a basic shop class, but it's far beyond that. Little did I know there's a whole high-tech industry involved with these high-quality machines," says Isaac Hermes.

"Mr. Mattson came in and said they're making a training center for everyone to go through where you're learning things that most people aren't going to know about, be more overqualified than other people, and more likely to find a job," says Chase Miller. "Now that we are here I can see everything that he's put into play and it's incredible the way that he was able to convince those companies to donate the machines and sponsor us. I can't thank them enough and I'm very grateful for everyone here."

"The first day I came into the woodworking class my mind was kind of blown," says Chandon Harris. "I was expecting a little cabinet shop with a couple of saws, some sanding materials and chisels. We have millions of dollars in machinery here. It's just incredible to me."

Quenten Cheesman, who works full time at a cabinet shop and plans to open his own shop some day, adds, "I remember the first day Dean came into the school. He made a good point that this woodshop is not like any other. It's wood manufacturing, not woodshop. That stuck with me. Then he mentioned the idea of an actual training center. Before I wasn't sure what to do after high school. Now I can continue to learn new skills and operate different machines."



Students at the MiLL are learning basic construction and machinery operation.

ABUNDANCE OF SUPPORT

There were many obstacles and challenges to getting the MiLL started. If there weren't, it would have been done years ago. For starters, Mattson had to move from Oregon to Colorado, which took him away from his family for most of that first year. Mattson has strong sentiments about helping others, especially the underprivileged. His passion and desire to educate people about woodworking, and to find a happy and joyful career, made the project his calling.

"The CTE program is designed to help people of all ages to understand that they are valued on this earth and to ultimately find a career pathway that they can succeed in and find fulfillment," he says.

Mattson never falls short in giving credit where credit is due. He says the generosity he's experienced is overwhelming. He especially remembers being nervous when he got to the step of communicating and securing machines, technologies, power tools and fixtures from partners at no cost.

"The challenge of looking at a blue print drawing of the MiLL with all the placements of the future machines was daunting to me. I placed red flags on the machines hoping to turn them green when they were secured.

"I realized it was one of the biggest challenges in business that I had ever faced. I could only do one call a day as I was teaching full time. The first partner I called was Gabriela Martinez-Salas, president of Conquest Industries. Gabby's first comment was, 'Dean, please tell me exactly what it is you need from my company to get the Na-

tional Training Center started and don't hold back from telling me anything.' That was the confidence booster I needed. I asked our partners, 'what technology do you want the next generation of woodworkers to be trained on and how?' All the red flags turned to green. It represents millions of dollars."

Another huge factor is the people who bought into the vision, according to Mattson.



Staffing includes five instructors, three graduate assistants, and three volunteers.

“My wife Rosemary retired from teaching and serves as MiLL’s executive assistant. Tim Kistler, Scott Campbell and Dennis Neal (superintendent and director of facilities for the Widefield School District, respectively) were critical in meeting the challenges head on and overcoming them. Without these senior executives from Peyton and Widefield School Districts and their support, the MiLL would not exist,” says Mattson.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

To help the rest of the industry move forward quickly with creating programs in other locations, Mattson will shift to a consultant role in 2018.

“One of the primary areas of work force development we want to concentrate on is the military and programs like the Wounded Warriors to train and offer these American heroes a new career path,” he says.

It is the goal of the MiLL to teach several hundred students in day and evening courses. First semester classes include basic construction and cabinet manufacturing. Staffing includes five instructors, three intern graduate students, and three volunteers.



Mattson, left, hopes the first MiLL will be one of many.

ble nature and determination, Mattson is certainly one of them. A true visionary, he made a spiritual connection on this new venture.

“In the midst of all the challenges of getting the MiLL up and operating, I stopped one evening when I was all alone, and I sat down on the floor in the main lab and looked around. I saw the magnitude of the facility and all the machines, fixtures and tools. I envisioned students working at the benches and on the machines. Tears were running down my cheeks. I felt humbled, proud and blessed,” Mattson recalls.

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PHOTO: BRIAN PAYNE/REDUX PLUS