

SCHOOL OF ROCK

By Corry Anderson-Fennell

In June, 10 ambitious high school seniors from the Surrey School District were studying for their final exams and attending grad parties with their friends.

By August, they were B&B Contracting's newest construction apprentices working 40-plus hours a week building British Columbia.

And they couldn't be more driven.

"I'm definitely going to be pointing out things I built while we're driving down the road," said 17-year-old Corbin Lanz, smiling.

Lanz, who graduated from Surrey's Lord Tweedsmuir Secondary, and nine other grads from around the Surrey School District are part of a first-time training and employment partnership between the school district, B&B Contracting, and Local 1611.

In July, students took the four-week Level 1 Construction Craft Worker apprentice program at Training PLUS (Professional Labourers' Union School). Their technical training comprised 120 hours of classroom and practical experience with instruction focused on site safety, the operation of construction equipment and tools, material handling, concrete and masonry, utilities and pipeline, and roadwork.

After four weeks, students wrote a final exam, and were then dispatched to B&B Contracting for what could be a lifelong career complete with family-supporting and progressive wages, benefits, pension, job security and opportunities for advancement. They'll be eligible to write their Red Seal exam after they complete Level 2 training next year, and complete 4,000 hours in their trade.

Most trades apprenticeships take four years to complete – double the CCW's two-year pathway. The shorter route to a Red Seal and the security that construction affords even in an economic downturn are two of the reasons 18-year-old Patrick Small chose the program.

"People will always need roads, water, sewage systems and other vital infrastructure no matter what's going on with the government or the economy," notes Small, a graduate of Earl Marriott Secondary.

Owing to an arsenal of varied competencies, Construction Craft Workers are also extremely versatile and can work on a multitude of different job sites – another reason Small chose the apprenticeship program.

"It's a lot more diverse than other trades. And if you demonstrate that you're a hard worker and follow all the safety protocols, you're going to get ahead. You might be on a shovel at first, but you can grow – maybe into a foreperson or supervisory position."

BUILDING A LIFELONG CAREER

Small is not wrong, and B&B Contracting's own operations manager, Peter Mihalech, is living proof. Mihalech started at B&B as a summer labourer between academic semesters at the University of Victoria, where he was pursuing a degree in political science and history. When he didn't get the teaching



practicum he wanted, he just kept working at B&B, earning, he discovered, more than he would as a new teacher.

"They recognized something in me, I think," says Mihalech of his early days with B&B.

Eventually, Mihalech switched gears from teaching to construction management, and pursued a Bachelor of Technology Construction Management degree (BTech CM) at the BC Institute of Technology. He took night classes for five years while working full time, and B&B paid his tuition. Mihalech is now part of the senior leadership for the 75-year-old company, which employs more than 600 people, including 400 trades workers, and is one of the largest civil contractors in the province. Recent B&B projects include the 202nd Street overpass, the widening of Fraser Highway as part of the SkyTrain Expansion and the massive Tsawwassen Commons shopping centre.

Mihalech's university-student-turned-construction-worker trajectory is incredibly common. LiUNA Local 1611's Training PLUS Administrator Tom Miller attended Fraser Valley University out of high school, intent on a diploma in Business Administration. He spent his first two summers between semesters working alongside his dad at a unionized construction company. He liked the work and he liked the money, and he decided it was the better career for him.

"My parents weren't exactly pumped but I think they got over it," quips Miller.

Miller worked his way up the ranks, changing employers, and ultimately joining Training PLUS as an instructor. He became the program's administrator in 2019 and now oversees Local 1611's entire training suite and sits on its Executive Board.

As far as Miller is concerned, union trades training centres like Training PLUS are the best-kept secret in the building trades. "You can get a trade certification, and most of the time you don't even have to pay for it – and you get a great career."

Of the new apprentices, Miller notes "They're crushing it! They legitimately seem like they want to be here."

A NEW ATTITUDE

Attitudes toward construction and the trades are changing, albeit slowly. What used to be seen as a backup plan is now increasingly regarded as a premier career choice by students and their parents alike. It's quite a contrast from a decade or two ago.

"The idea of getting into the trades 20 years ago was a fallback," says Mihalech. "Now it's posh. Parents are realizing the trades are good and prosperous jobs. University isn't the end all, be all to be successful."

And school districts are picking up on this sea change. That's definitely the case in Surrey, where Brad Edmondson and his team work hard to ensure students understand the possibilities and potential that exist within the lucrative construction sector.

The skilled trades offer top wages and job security, the opportunity to earn while you learn, financial incentives ranging from student grants to tax rebates on tools and travel, and even prestige: the ability to say "I built that."

"Not all students want to go to university when they finish high school," said Edmondson the district's Youth Work in Trades Co-ordinator.

A Red Seal electrician by trade, Edmondson is something of a skilled trades evangelist. He's watched the district's Youth Work in Trades program grow and flourish, yet Construction Craft Worker was conspicuously absent from the offerings, despite being a Red Seal trade. So he reached out to Skilled



Trades B.C. (formerly the Industry Training Authority), which connected him to Miller and Mihalech. The result is the district's first partnership with Training PLUS and B&B Contracting – and it won't be the last.

"The other programs all cater to Grade 10 and 11 students going into Grade 11 and 12, but there was nothing for Grade 12 students who hadn't decided what to do in time to participate in the district trade programs. This particular program captures those students and I thought it would be a niche that would fit really well," says Edmondson.

Edmondson was impressed by B&B's willingness to take on so many new, young apprentices, some of whom haven't even turned 18.

"It's nice to work with companies like B&B who come in and see the long game, who are willing to come in and present their trade to new people. They're looking at the long picture."

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

B&B's Tara Mihalech, a former resource teacher with the Langley School District, may be one of the reasons for the company's progressive perspective. When she joined B&B's marketing and communications team, she brought her passion for student work experience programs with her.

"In my work in schools, I've met some truly incredible young people who found that our traditional school model didn't allow them to shine. They possessed valuable skills – they were bright, hard-working, mechanically inclined, great problem-solvers, team players, had excellent visual-spatial skills, etc. – but school didn't always provide the opportunity to showcase these talents."

Mihalech believes the traditional view of education is too narrow, too focused on textbooks and worksheets.

"There are so many kids out there who are hungry for hands-on work experience and training."

As for the early entry into a career, Mihalech believes there is value in leveraging training and growth opportunities while young.

"It provides the time to learn what they don't like – and in some ways, that's just as valuable as learning what they do enjoy."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

SAM TURTON

"I thought it would feel like school, but it doesn't really feel like school. I like the variety and the structure of the course, and I like the instructors."

CORBIN LANZ, 17

"I would say keep an open mind and try to learn as much as you can. Every piece of advice you get is helpful."

SYDNEY JUNG

"I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do after high school. I wanted to try something new, so I thought why not?"

FADI MEKHA BRGA

"I was going to choose trades or computers, but I realized if I chose computers, I'd be sitting all day so I chose this and I like it."

YVHANN ERMITA

"I didn't know what I was going to do after high school and I preferred something physical, so I picked this."