

# SBC

magazine

# Seeing Is Believing



*Inside this Issue:* Lay-On Gables | Risk Management | Youth in the Plant

# Seeing Is Believing

## Integra Learns the Benefit of Giving a Plant Tour to Young People

**“I’VE BEEN DOING THIS SINCE 1992,”** says John Hernandez, general manager of Integra Steel Truss, “and this is the first time I’ve done anything like this.”

Last October, Hernandez opened his doors to a class of students from Taller San Jose Hope Builders, an organization that instructor John Puckett explains aims to “help kids break the cycle of violence and drugs.”

As the organization’s lead construction training supervisor, “I run a 4,000-square-foot facility where we train 18-28 year olds,” Puckett explained. “We pay them \$100 a week just to attend school; it’s an 8:00 to 4:30 job, and we treat it as such. After 16 weeks, we help them find jobs. We offer them support for two years after they graduate from the programs. It’s pretty amazing; these are kids that most people have written off.”



### GETTING MORE KIDS AROUND TRUSSES

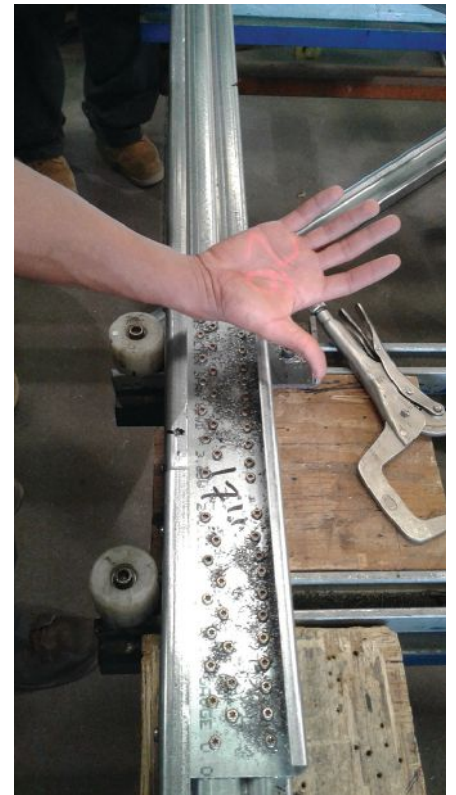
Even if the tour doesn’t ultimately turn into a job at a truss plant, Puckett sees it as an invaluable learning experience for students because it lets them see the jobs that actually exist and are available to them. “Students have no clue what jobs are out there!” Puckett lamented. “Most of them look at construction as a dirty job – they have no idea what our industry is like or what it’s about.”

Puckett, a certified OSHA instructor and former general contractor with a finish carpentry background, has spent years sharing his passion for the building industry. Before joining the staff of Hope Builders, he spent 19 years teaching construction at a public high school. Moving from the trades to teaching, he was astounded by how little students knew about construction jobs as well as the attitude they had toward that type of work.

Part of the problem? “They’ve never really been around trusses,” Hernandez pointed out. As the Hope Builders group toured his plant, they had tons of questions, including “How do you get into trusses?” and “How much does each truss cost?” They were curious about how to get start-

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ed in the truss-building business and relatively unfamiliar with a product found in most of their homes.

The value of plant tours, Puckett said, “is off the charts. It can’t be undersold or overestimated.” Seeing the production process up close, making personal connections within the industry and becoming familiar with a real, obtainable job is a vital step in changing perceptions of manufacturing and construction careers. “I can’t believe how many kids come back and say, ‘I had no idea!’ When the teacher tells them, it’s one thing; when somebody else tells them, it’s another.”

“The kids – young men, they’re not kids,” Hernandez noted, “they were pretty intrigued by the process.” The group spent an hour touring the production facilities, and they spent an

equal amount of time meeting with a truss designer who demonstrated the truss design software and answered questions.

### PROVIDING A VALUABLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Hernandez says he’ll happily give tours to Puckett’s classes each year or semester – it’s a way to fill a critical education gap. “With the truss industry, there’s no college you can go to,” Hernandez said. SBCA’s Truss Technician Training (TTT) program offers good courses, he added, but that’s a resource that’s only commonly used “once you’re already in the industry.”

The lack of formal education options gives the wrong impression. Hernandez

[sbcindustry.com/wfd](http://sbcindustry.com/wfd)

SBCA has created a webpage designed to provide information and tools for CMs to find and hire prospective employees, assess promising candidates, train new employees and provide continuing education opportunities to retain existing personnel. Currently, one of the most widely used resources is a brief video CMs can download and use to promote careers in the industry.

emphasizes that there is a great upward career path in the truss industry. "A lot of really good office personnel have come from the shop," he explains. It's not unusual for truss designers, department managers, sales reps and even executives to start their careers on the production floor. "You don't have to hold a PhD," to work in the industry, Hernandez said. "It's something you learn as you go. As long as you have a little initiative, are good with numbers (and you don't have to be a math genius!), are willing to learn, you'll be good."

Puckett says vocational training is something too many students miss out on. "I am not alone in feeling like we're shortchanging our kids in not providing enough career education.



They're just told that they're going to college – and it really bothers me," he said, because "not everybody's going to go, and fewer still will graduate. I think we're doing a massive disservice to our kids by offering that pathway alone."

In Puckett's mind, it's an ideal match – potential employees eager for prom-

ising careers and an industry that needs to expand its workforce. "If the industry could only get itself involved in schools that are open to bringing career opportunities," he said, "it would be absolutely amazing what the industry would see in terms of applicants."

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## SIZING UP POTENTIAL FUTURE EMPLOYEES

A new pool of applicants wasn't top of mind for Hernandez when he scheduled the tour. With the size of Integra's operation and its current job load, Hernandez was more concerned about sticking to his production schedule than getting new faces in the door. Besides, he said he'd never really considered a plant tour as a hiring practice. "Typically, it's word of mouth," he explained. "When it's time to start hiring, the management looks to referrals. Very rarely do we hire a walk-in off the street and don't have high schools or community colleges reach out to us."

Hernandez notes that such hiring practices are standard for the industry, but they're also practical for Integra's size. "We're 12 shop employees and five office employees," Hernandez said. "We want to hire someone we can vouch for, or that someone can vouch for." Integra, like many component manufacturing plants, relies on employees to bring in relatives or acquaintances who understand what they're getting into and will be a good fit with the existing employees. "It just tends to work out better for everybody," said Hernandez. "We don't hire a lot, and when we do, those guys tend to stick around."

The classic pathway into the industry worked for Hernandez himself. He explained that he got into the truss business through a brother-in-law; he wouldn't have known about the field or ever thought to pursue a career in it without that personal connection.

Still, he came away from the tour interested in expanding the circle of those in-the-know about what component manufacturers are up to. "It was a great experience. It's kind of neat to be able to share what you do with others. I don't even know if my kids know what I do!" Hernandez reflected. He recognizes that what leaves his plant every day is a highly engineered, carefully designed product that gets approval from numerous people – architects, builders, inspectors and so on – but it's something that few people notice. "Once it's covered up, nobody even knows it's there."

## BUILDING COMMUNITY, MAKING CONNECTIONS

"Everything you can add to your knowledge base makes you a better contractor and lets you better serve your clients," Puckett said. Even if he didn't leave the tour with all the answers, he left with a new professional connection. "If I had a truss issue right now," Puckett said, "if I was building a house and it was an interesting roof situation, I'd be on the phone with John Hernandez. I always tell the kids: it isn't what you know in this industry, it's who you know. Because you can't know everything."

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**“I’m totally sold on the importance of visiting manufacturers,” said Puckett. “The industry, the more they get involved, the better it will be for them.”**

When those connections happen, everyone benefits and the effect lasts a long time. “My students now know John Hernandez,” declared Puckett. “In the future, when there’s a truss issue, I guarantee he’s the first one they call.” It’s a relationship that will last their entire careers, Puckett predicts – it’s something he’s seen firsthand. “It sticks when they go out into the industry,” he explained, recalling how he’d teach construction safety to his high school students. “I get texts from kids from years ago,” he said, texts that underscore just how well they learned what he taught. They’ll send pictures and say, “Look, this guy is in a trench five feet deep with no protection!”

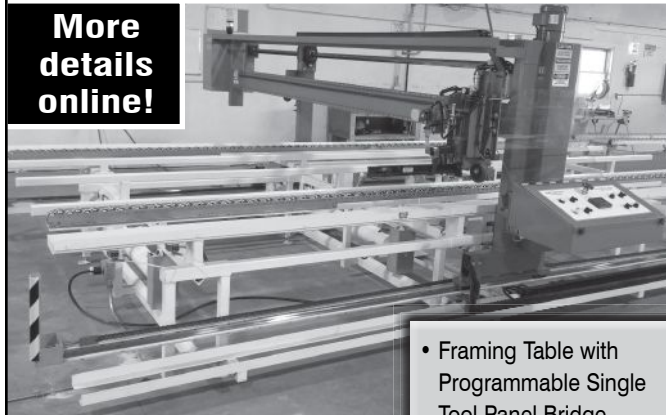
“I’m totally sold on the importance of visiting manufacturers,” said Puckett. “The industry, the more they get

involved, the better it will be for them.” The more component manufacturers connect with students as well as other professionals in the field, the bigger and more positive the impact those people will have when they head out to the field. The experience he had at Integra is something everyone out on a jobsite should be clamoring for, Puckett said. “It’s too bad it can’t be mandatory. Smart superintendents should plan manufacturing tours!”

Of course, inviting people in isn’t the only way to reach out. Puckett is also a big proponent of getting industry personnel into classrooms or vocational training programs. “It would take a bit of work on the industry’s part to find out what local schools offer,” he admits, but he says the effort would be well worth it. Students like those

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in the Hope Builders program, he says, are “just floating. They’re looking for a direction. They’re a huge resource that’s going untapped. There’s a huge gap between kids and the industry. If we all work together, we can pull that gap closed and the kids can walk across.” When that happens, Puckett says, it’ll mean good careers for his students and a ready workforce for the industry.

For Hernandez, the day was a success regardless of whether the Hope Builders students seek careers in component manufacturing, elsewhere in the construction industry, or in another sector entirely. “Maybe three or four of them end up on the truss side,” he said. “Maybe none.” He adds that despite the distance between the Integra plant and inner-city Santa Ana, he’d be thrilled to extend an offer. “I did say if any of them ever move out this way to stop in and fill out an application.” But what matters most, he emphasized, is that it was a positive experience for everyone involved. “The tour went great!” he said. The Hope Builders students were “energetic, fresh-faced kids who are interested” in what’s going on at Integra.

When Puckett mentions the facility tours he takes with his students, contractors often respond with, “Oh, man – I’d love to go do that!” Puckett’s response? You can, anytime. All you need to do is call up someone like Hernandez and ask.

Both Hernandez and Puckett agree relationship building with young people like this isn’t hard, it just takes a few dedicated individuals at a company to make it happen. Not enough component manufacturers are doing this across the country, so it isn’t difficult to get the attention of a local school if a company reaches out. Even if the young people who tour a plant don’t ultimately end up working in the industry, they have been exposed to what the industry does and that will stay with them no matter what career they end up pursuing. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dale Erlandson focuses on the individuals who make up the component manufacturing industry and how they are leaving their mark in their communities. Sean Shields contributed to this article.



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