

Hot JOBS



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Project GRILL gives students a taste of manufacturing careers | By Ellen Zettel

Riverview Academy students warm their hands around their cupcake-shaped grill they built for Rockline Industries during the Project GRILL tailgate party at Road America last month.

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—Karla Zahn, Lakeshore Technical College

NOT LONG AFTER THE LAST snow thaws and the signs of spring appear, folks in Northeast Wisconsin welcome the warmer weather by engaging in the annual rite of the first come-one, come-all cookout of the year.

It seems perfectly appropriate, then, that students from seven Sheboygan County high schools would debut grills they built themselves – with the assistance of manufacturing sponsors – at a Road America family tailgate party in Elkhart Lake on May 17.

At the event, the sizzle of brats lured hundreds of race-goers, while the grills themselves were being judged for “fit, form and function,” says Karla Zahn, director of student success at Lakeshore Technical College.

Zahn chaired the 2008-2009 leadership team for Project GRILL (Growing Readiness in Learning and Leading), which just completed its second year in Sheboygan County. Approximately 60 student participants

built barbeque grills from scratch, collectively representing Howards Grove, Oostburg, Plymouth, Random Lake, Sheboygan Falls and Sheboygan North high schools, as well as Riverview Academy in Sheboygan.

According to Zahn, the seven lakeshore schools and their manufacturing partners embraced Project GRILL – which mirrors similar programs in Manitowoc and Fond du Lac counties, as well as the Fox Valley – for exposing students to the variety of career opportunities available in manufacturing.

Zahn noted that the spark that ignited Sheboygan County’s Project GRILL came more than two years ago from a former employee of Johnsonville Sausage. “She had a vision about how this program would get high school students excited about manufacturing careers,” Zahn says, adding that 40 percent of Sheboygan County’s jobs are in manufacturing, with an increasing requirement for technical know-how.

Sheboygan County businesspeople and educators are concerned that recent news of local plant layoffs, downsizings and closures may have understandably discouraged high school students from considering manufacturing jobs. At a careers conference entitled “Manufacture Your Future” earlier this year, presenters attempted to correct that view and reinforce the idea that manufacturers, now *continued >*

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and in the future, will always need employees with advanced skills and knowledge. Jobs held by such employees carry average annual salaries of \$45,974 in Wisconsin, according to 2007 state data from the National Association of Manufacturers. That figure is \$9,000 higher than the average annual state salary of \$36,823, according to the association.

As participants in Project GRILL, student teams from each high school must ensure their products perform well at the annual Road America family tailgate party, Zahn says. She notes that teams typically pilot their grills at school-related functions prior to their official debut in order to pinpoint – and eliminate – any bugs.

However, beyond making sure their grills actually work, the students are free to demonstrate their creativity in product design. They take full advantage of that opportunity, as this year’s work clearly shows, Zahn says. For instance, Random Lake High School’s team made a grill in the form of a vintage cheese box. Howards Grove High School designed their grill as a tiger, entirely made of stainless steel.

While Project GRILL activities involve a fair share of fun, the main focus is to “expose student teams to different manufacturing facilities and their products,” Zahn says. Each school’s team is paired with a manufacturing partner responsible for defining – and helping the students to apply – technical skills as they make their grills.

Students involved in Project GRILL tour a manufacturing partner’s facilities and learn about its products. They also have the chance to take part in the “Parade of Manufacturers,” during which they get an insider’s view of the facilities of manufacturers affiliated with Project GRILL.

Zahn says area companies participate in Project GRILL at three different levels of monetary or in-kind support. Each high school’s primary manufacturing

partner, however, provides a cash donation for the project, as well as leadership for the team.

“In the HR community, we are always looking for ways to connect with talent,” says Tim Kellner, vice president of human resources for J.L. French and a member of the Project GRILL leadership team. Also spurring J.L. French’s interest in Project GRILL was its involvement with the Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing Alliance which similarly seeks to build and maintain a strong talent pipeline for local companies.

Kellner says J.L. French has been able to introduce itself to high school students who, one day, may be job candidates.



Students from Howards Grove School District watch their Tiger grill cook brats for the first time. The tiger is made of stainless steel and built through a partnership with Vollrath.

In turn, students get a good handle on the company’s purpose, products, processes and expectations of employees – information which will prove invaluable during a future job search or interview.

In addition to J.L. French and Johnsonville, primary manufacturing partners for Sheboygan County’s Project GRILL this past school year were Masters Gallery Foods, Nemschoff, Rockline Industries, Sargento Foods and the Vollrath Co. Six other organizations, including Lakeshore Technical College and the Sheboygan Area School District, also provided support.

Project GRILL, recently honored at the Wisconsin Careers Conference in Madison, emulates that of similar programs in the Fox Valley and Manitowoc County, where students built mini-choppers – smaller-size motorbikes – instead of grills. Fond du Lac County’s program is similarly successful after completing its pilot year. There, students built grills.

Mike Cattelino, associate dean of manufacturing, information and agriculture for Fox Valley Technical College, says the program’s key value lies in giving area employers a preview of upcoming talent.

“It makes sense for companies to be looking at where their future job candidates are coming from,” Cattelino says. ■