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METAL MEETS METTLE

Legendary rockers fund grant initiative
for getting students into the workforce

BY DOUGLAS J. GUTH

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tacy Yonnone remembers working on cars with her father in the family garage, a radio nearby belting out tunes from a local rock station. World-renowned heavy metal band Metallica was on constant rotation back then, melting listener minds with tunes such as “Master of Puppets” and “Enter Sandman.”

Today, Yonnone is working with a different kind of heavy metal as a machinist apprentice for Bantam Tools in Peekskill, New York. This career opportunity transpired due to a collaboration between SUNY Westchester Community College and Metallica’s All Within My Hands (AWMH) foundation.

The foundation funds the Metallica Scholars Initiative, designed for students like Yonnone with an interest in career and technical education. Yonnone, 21, discovered the program through her job, jumping at a chance to upgrade her practical knowledge in the industry.

“I heard about the program from my bosses,” says Yonnone. “I got involved because I wanted to learn more about the trade. I saw it as an opportunity to step up my game and become more valuable to my company.”

In 2019, AWMH—alongside initiative sponsor the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)—provided 10 schools with \$100,000 each for tuition help, safety gear and learning materials. Since inception, the program has graduated 80%-90% of participants, with 95% of Metallica scholars finding jobs directly related to their studies.

Westchester received \$50,000 in 2021—the institution’s second year in the program—focusing mostly on training workers for the region’s growing advanced manufacturing sector. The college, which serves 31,000 full- and part-time learners in New York state, has further harnessed grants for cybersecurity and jobs around health-care, namely nursing assistants, phlebotomists and EKG technicians.

“The program is driven by the workforce needs of the community,” says Teresita Wisell, vice president of workforce development and community education at Westchester. “Starting with the president down to faculty, we are aligned with our city’s office of economic development.”

The initiative is now in its third year of rocking the workforce at Westchester. In 2021, about 30 Metallica scholars garnered manufacturing and metalworking skill certifications for direct employment in various middle skill positions.

During the grant’s first year in 2020, more than 250 students received training and professional certifications that increased their employability. Wisell points to custodians at manufacturing companies who transitioned to assembly line positions after taking grant-sponsored programming. These students are powering a regional economic engine that will only continue to expand, she says.

“Skilled trades offer individuals significant entry points to well-paying jobs that can then lead to fulfilling careers,” Wisell says. “And you can’t tell someone about this project without a huge smile coming across your face. The brand has other funders perking up and saying they want in on this, too.”

In a statement championing the Westchester award, AACC President and CEO Walter Bumphus said the program can usher a steady pipeline of much-needed talent into area industries.

“It’s a win-win for our students and the local economy,” says Bumphus. “For Metallica to continue to invest in these students and communities is a testament to the workforce education that community colleges provide.”

STRONG PROGRAM, FUN HOOK

The scholars program invested \$1.8 million in its fourth year to add another 10 colleges to the roster. This year, Metallica grants are expected to reach 2,000 students in 32 community colleges across 27 states.

Expansion comes as communities nationwide contend with a tight labor market spurred by changes in worker sentiment post-Covid. Even as unemployment numbers hover at 3.7% nationally, per August 2022 figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, entities like Washington’s Spokane Community College (SCC) are using the strategy as a skill enhancer and service provider for would-be tradespeople.

SCC is an early program adopter that is getting \$25,000 this go-round to spotlight workforce education and support the next generation of highly sought employees. Curricula funded by the grant encompasses manufacturing, health sciences and computer information programming, a trio of



demand areas accelerated by the pandemic, notes SCC President Kevin Brockbank.

Combined with a Covid-driven drop in enrollment, the regional worker deficit motivated SCC to tap into a grant program with an undeniably fun hook.

“We have a billboard in front of campus with Metallica’s logo – that is going to be recognized by anyone who listen to music,” says Brockbank, himself a veteran of five of the band’s concerts. “It draws people in for sure. There’s a value proposition in the name recognition for students looking for funding sources and wondering what the scholarship is all about. It’s a brand that turns heads, no doubt about it.”

SCC has integrated funding into 19 different programs, ranging from welding to machining to dental assistance and software development. Although successful participants are placed in entry-level jobs, these are career-oriented positions in viable growth industries.

“Our goal here is not just getting people into the job search cycle, but a livable career,” Brockbank says. “When you go into a doctor’s office, you talk to five people before getting to the doctor. Those are SCC graduates. The mechanics fixing your car are SCC graduates, too. We’re building the foundation of the workforce.”

GOING ALL IN FOR SUCCESS

Through the scholarship, participating institutions are reducing the financial burden on students, ideally permitting them to focus on their education, adds Brockbank. SCC was among the first 10 colleges to join the effort in 2019, immediately seeing dividends for individuals that utilized wraparound services in conjunction with the grant.



For example, Washington state—through its Workforce Transitions programming—provides additional financial support for job skills training. Students using the Metallica grant may also pay for books, tools or transportation to and from campus.

“We manage that money on a case-by-case basis,” Brockbank says. “That funding is a way to get people over the hump and to a success point.”

Elizabethtown Community and Technical College (ECTC) in Kentucky is going all in on the heavy metal theme with its Metallica award. As a nod to the region’s burgeoning advanced manufacturing sector, the college unveiled its “Ride the Lightning Learning Lab” as a mobile education and on-site skills training unit.

The lab, named after one of Metallica’s best-selling albums, offers flexible delivery of courses that aligns with student and employer needs. As just one example, a virtual reality welder lets students practice a variety of realistic jobs before they even pick up a welding torch. Such instant feedback is critical for learners to safely improve or correct their technique, say proponents.



A Metallica Scholar at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College.

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The rolling education unit is only one aspect of the program that has provided \$140,000 in scholarship funding for ECTC students over the last three academic years. Project participants also received certifications in HVAC technology, computer aided drafting and industrial maintenance. A commercial driver license program, meanwhile, has a 100% success rate in putting completists into good jobs.

Two scholarship recipients in the CDL program went on to start their own trucking companies, an outcome that highlights the program's overall value, says ECTC President Juston Pate.

"The overarching sentiment (toward Metallica) is appreciation," Pate says. "The band sees the value of skilled employees, and know they can make a difference by investing in the future of the community through career and technical education."

ECTC is the first two-year institution in Kentucky to obtain Metallica funding. Grant curricula harkens to the college's founding as a technical school, a tradition that continues today with courses in industrial electronics, robotics research and more. The grant program's emphasis

on advanced manufacturing has a myth-busting mission as well, insofar as proving the industry is not dark, dirty or dangerous.

"Lots of people are underemployed because they don't consider a career in a field like manufacturing a real possibility," Pate says. "It's a mentality from past decades that influences parental guidance around career choice as much as it does student thought. That's why this program is so beneficial—having that brand awareness brings attention to manufacturing that we wouldn't get on our own."

STRONG WORKFORCE = STRONG ECONOMY

ECTC Chief Institutional Advancement Officer Megan Stith says utilizing the high-profile scholarship was an easy decision, particularly as the unprecedented virus crisis already had students scrambling for new jobs or simply re-evaluating their futures.

"We always have to say, 'Yes, *that* Metallica' when it comes to the program, because that is everyone's first reaction," says Stith. "Metallica is really that big of a partner to have. It's cool for students to see performers of that caliber taking such an active interest in them."

Lone Star College in Houston is now on its fourth grant encore courtesy of the legendary rockers. For 2022, the college is using funding to navigate learners toward exciting new careers in mechatronics and robotics. Past grants placed applicants in fields including manufacturing, healthcare and education.

The Metallica name has not only gotten attention from students, but other donors as well. The Wolverine Boot Company awarded \$50,000 to match a past scholar grant. The company also donated

ECTC's mobile Ride the Lightning Learning Lab



Photo Credit: ECTC



boots for students aiming to work in Houston's dominant manufacturing industry.

Peer-to-peer mentoring provides a further boost for would-be tradespeople, with classes taught in a lab rather than a classroom setting. Linda Head, a senior associate and vice chancellor for the office of external and employer relations at LSC, says a fast track to real work is a major attraction for students.

"Once they know they're able to learn this stuff, they can have a career with a multi-national manufacturer," Head says. "Or they can even come back here and get a bachelor's degree in energy, manufacturing and trades management. These are jobs paying \$20 an hour and up."

About 95% of grantees finish the program, a journey buoyed by additional financial aid options that pay for tuition, books and supplies. Keeping completists in-state for life-long careers is the long-term goal of the effort.

"You can't have a strong economy without a strong workforce," says Head. "The gift from Metallica to pay for these great jobs is helping both the community and its economic development. It's so neat that a group of successful band members have taken time and attention to worry about the community."

'GO BIG AND GO LOUD'

Participating colleges are more than pleased with programmatic outcomes thus far. At Westchester, all students in the certified production tech program completed the course before moving onto a manufacturing skills certification exam. The college also has 100% course completion in its Metallica-funded computer assisted design course, while another cohort is in the process of completing credentials in the areas of electronics, electromechanical engineering and programmable logistics control.

"The enlightened philanthropy of the Metallica scholars program is leading the way to putting



our communities back to work, enabling us to give people important skills that translate into meaningful, family-sustaining careers," Westchester President Belinda Miles said in an email. "Equally as important, this initial relationship has inspired new partnerships and new ways of working that have increased our impact exponentially."

Yonnone, the machinist apprentice from New York, is perhaps emblematic of the "typical" Metallica grantee, in that she started with little background in advanced manufacturing. Nonetheless, she has obtained all available certifications, gotten promoted in her job, and is now continuing her education at Westchester as a degree-seeking student in mechanical technology.

"This is a trade that's not going to die," Yonnone says. "It will continue to blossom, especially with companies pushing forward with the technology. The Metallica program has been highly beneficial for me."

If skilled trades are the engine of the economy, then the Metallica grant is the fuel that keeps these jobs blazing down the road, notes Ilene Lieberman, senior director of development and leadership giving at Westchester.

"It's so much fun to have Metallica involved with this work," says Lieberman. "Go big and go loud. This is what we should always be doing." ■



Stacy Yonnone is a Metallica Scholar at SUNY Westchester Community College and a machinist apprentice for Bantam Tools.