Getting young people involved in the trades

The Workforce Development Scholarship Program gives kids a viable alternative to college.

By **Geoff Currier** - January 31, 2019

Lindsey Scott, MVYouth executive director. —Gabrielle Mannino

For kids interested in going off to college, between guidance counseling and financial counseling, there are a lot of resources available to help them achieve their goals. For kids who are more self-directed on a noncollege track, they're often left to figure things out for themselves.

"It's not like there's a guidebook for kids who want to be an electrician or who are not interested in a traditional four-year college path," Lindsey Scott, executive director of MVYouth said. "The kids just don't have the same resources."

The mission of MVYouth is "supporting the Martha's Vineyard community by investing in its young people." The business model for the organization is to organize donors around a shared mission, and by pooling donations, to multiply the impact of each gift.

In 2014, MVYouth assembled 40 founding donors who each made a commitment to pledge $25,000 for a minimum of four years. Today there are 70 founders. This year, the group will disperse $1.9 million to two programs, expansion grants (like raising money to renovate the Ice Arena) and scholarships. "We began as a college scholarship program for Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, Charter School students, and students from Falmouth Academy," Scott said. "We support really terrific seniors on their way to college who may not have enough money to do it."

But MVYouth realized there was a whole other group of students who were not on a college path who need help and direction as well. They created the Workforce Development Scholarship Program to address the needs of those students.

"The Workforce Development Scholarship Program is for high school seniors, but it's also available to kids who have recently graduated," Scott said, "who are interested in pursuing some kind of professional development or technical training in fields like healthcare or the trades. These job opportunities could be on-Island, a combination of on and off, or they could lead to an apprenticeship with a local company."

MVYouth has reached out to many businesses and organizations on the Island to get a read on their hiring needs and demands for the next generation of workers.

“We’re in the midst of a nationwide and certainly Island-wide labor shortage,” Newell Isbell Shinn of the Martha’s Vineyard Builders Association (MVBA) said. “There’s a crunch all over the place, and we’re constantly looking to find young people out of high school and through their 30s. They’re hard to find.” MVBA is a collective of 80 construction professionals on the Island.

The labor shortage was highlighted in a recent issue of Forbes magazine. “Bob Ernst, president of FBN Construction, a high-end construction firm in Boston, said the labor shortage has forced him to increase salaries to retain good talent. ‘We’ve had to increase salaries significantly in the last five years,’ Ernst said. ‘We generally do what we have to do to keep them. Some of our skilled carpenters are making $80,000 to $110,000 a year.’”

“The problem is no less acute on the Island,” Isbell Shinn said. “In fact, it’s even more acute, given our housing affordability problems.”

“I think there’s a need to educate young people about how the trades can be an extraordinarily viable career path,” Sarah Hughes said, also of the MVBA. “College is not the only way to get a good-paying job.”

Brian Nelson, co-owner of Nelson Mechanical Design, is the Island’s largest HVAC plumbing shop. ”It’s going to require a cultural shift,” Nelson said, “to get young people more interested in working in the trades.” He says that in a trade like plumbing, it’s “not your father’s Oldsmobile; it’s not just about working with a wrench.”

“All equipment sold in the U.S. for heating and cooling has a computer in it,” Nelson says. “And that means you need a computer-savvy tech to service and install it. It’s a great fit for high school kids who are digital natives, for whom computers are second nature.”

Nelson has only to look at his own daughter, Noelle, to illustrate his point. “Noelle tried college three times and realized she just didn’t like it, it wasn’t a good fit. Today she works for me in our service department — it’s hands-on and challenging — she loves it.”

Getting young people involved in the trades has a ripple effect greater than just providing a rewarding, sustainable career.

“When kids can’t find jobs,” Scott says, “they can go down that rabbit hole that can lead to addiction. Finding employment for young people can also have an effect on the whole economic structure of the Vineyard. It can lead to a more sustainable economy that can support the next generation of business owners.”

MVYouth Workforce Development Scholarships are available to pay for trade school education after high school, or to cover the costs of various expenses such as application and licensing fees, even transportation costs.

On Tuesday, Feb. 5, there will be a meeting on Workforce Development Scholarships from 6 to 7 pm at the West Tisbury library. Career options in the trades on the Island include jobs in construction, healthcare, horticulture, culinary arts, automotive technology, and maritime science.

Think of them as the careers of the future.