Inspiring the Next Generation of Welders

We’ve all heard the statistics: The average age of a welder is around 57, the current demand for welders in the United States continues to rise, the industry that we live and work in will be in jeopardy if we don’t bring the next generations into the welding and cutting trade’s pipeline, and so on. Fortunately, the American Welding Society (AWS) and AWS Foundation are taking the challenge of filling that pipeline head-on.

The Welding Equipment Manufacturers Association (WEMCO), a standing committee of AWS, and the Careers in Welding Committee, a subcommittee of the AWS Foundation, have separate but coordinated efforts underway that target individuals who will be our next generation entering the welding and cutting trade.

WEMCO oversees the execution of the annual Excellence in Welding Awards (formerly the Image of Welding Awards). Two of the nine awards presented each year are focused on Educational Facilities and Educators; for each category, there is one award recipient. As a member of the nomination review committee, I can personally tell you the winners of these awards are very deserving of the honor — the number of quality nominations in each of the categories is overwhelming. This system represents an outstanding way of recognizing the people and institutions developing the critical assets our industry will need in the future.

WEMCO also has a program called Weld & Shine designed to attract individuals who are at the stage in their life when they need to make a career decision, either entering the workforce for the first time or reentering it under a new career umbrella. The Weld & Shine program sends welding industry experts into the market equipped with a compelling story about why the welding industry is one that these individuals should consider.

In addition, the AWS Foundation recently assembled the Careers in Welding Committee. This committee is providing visibility and education to the younger generations who are still years away from establishing their career path. It is providing nationally recognized associations with a window into welding, giving these young people a sense of how welding impacts our world by using strategies that get and keep a young person’s attention.

What I’ve mentioned reminds me of a recent encounter while visiting a customer. During a plant tour, I was introduced to a young man named Brad LeTourneau, who also brought his class to this facility on a trip. Brad is a graduate of the welding program at Waukesha County Technical College, Pewaukee, Wis. He actually went to work at the company I was visiting and spent eight years there using the skills he learned at Waukesha. After spending time applying what he learned, he wanted to impart that wisdom both as a student and practitioner to other young people, making them aware that there are many noble careers in the welding field. After eight years of working in the industry, Brad went back to Waukesha County Technical College to teach and now holds the position of instructor, metal fabrication/welding.

Brad’s story is interesting from many angles. He found welding as a trade that he was interested in, went into the industry to apply his trade, and is now teaching and building that pipeline of welders we all know we desperately need.

Our mission as an industry is to create more individuals like Brad. WEMCO and the AWS Foundation Careers in Welding Committee are focused on building that much-needed pipeline. Our industry and our country are depending on it.

If you’re reading this, you have a vested interest in keeping our industry a great one to work in. Share your story with others, particularly the younger generations that will carry the torch for all of us in the future.

For more information about WEMCO’s Excellence in Welding Awards along with Weld & Shine programs, contact WEMCO Program Manager Keila DeMoraes at kdemoraes@aws.org.