Michael Dixon started his welding career at the tender age of ten as a helper for his uncle Benny. “Benny would weld, and I would chip and brush as he completed each weld,” said Dixon. “I was very fortunate to have him and a family friend, Kent Brandon, as mentors. They took the time to teach me mechanics, welding, and every type of dairy farm equipment repair possible.”

While he was earning a degree in computer networking technology, Dixon’s life took a different turn when he became paralyzed from a motorcycle accident. With Brandon’s encouragement, he switched career paths and began pursuing a degree in welding.

Dixon’s trajectory as an educator took flight when he started teaching a continuing education course in 2006. Four years later, he became a full-time faculty member. In 2013, he was hired as a lead welding instructor for Surry Community College (SCC), Dobson, N.C.

Dixon’s classroom puts real-world projects at the forefront to expand students’ skill sets. This year, with the help of electrical engineering graduates and the school’s machining technology department, students in Dixon’s welding fabrication class will help develop and construct a wheelchair powered by lithium-ion battery packs. The wheelchair will be controlled by joystick or radio, and have a top speed of 20 mph for 40 miles, compared to the 8 mph and 10 miles offered by standard wheelchairs.

Dixon uses his own story to motivate students who have made mistakes. “I tell them I believe in second chances, and that I received a second chance when I survived all the injuries that left me paralyzed,” he said. “I want to give them the skill set that will lead them to a successful welding career and a second chance to be a success.”

Dixon also helps his program and students secure funds. In 2017, he supplied SCC with a Piranha ironworker through the AWS Foundation Welder Workforce Grant, as well as aided six of his students in attaining AWS scholarships.

For his unrelenting dedication to students and education, Dixon was awarded the Faculty of the Year Award at SCC, as well as the 2018 Excellence in Teaching Award by the State Board of Community Colleges in North Carolina.

“I believe my positive attitude, work ethic, and dedication to my program allows the students to understand that being paralyzed and in a wheelchair doesn’t define who I am,” said Dixon. “I am a welder!”

Sarah Walker was 15 years old when she was bit by the welding bug through her involvement with the Downriver Technical Consortium Vocational program in Flat Rock, Mich. “A woodshop teacher recommended the program to me, and I walked down to the welding classroom and tried it,” she said.

Although Walker had been teaching basic welding to her coworkers since her first fabrication job, she didn’t consider teaching as a career path until she began taking engineering courses at Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Mich.

“Even then it seemed like a pipe dream with all of the student loan debt I had accrued, but I knew that at some point I would go into teaching,” she explained.

Walker’s prediction was spot-on. Today, she is a full-time educator at Oakland Schools Technical Campus Southeast (OSTC-SE) in Royal Oak, Mich., where she teaches welding, soldering, and brazing to high school students. Walker also dedicates herself to teaching welding part-time at Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor, Mich.

“They’re so excited to learn how to weld, and so raw that even the tiniest improvement seems like a giant leap forward,” she said about her high school students. “Their progress is very gratifying.”

In addition to learning how to weld, Walker’s students are taught valuable life skills needed for success at any job. “The most important things I teach in my class are hard work, treat others with respect, and behave with self respect,” she said. “We discuss professional courtesy continuously throughout the year, and I believe that we create a lot of leaders and good role models in the program.”

Walker also teaches students how to build their physical and mental stamina, a necessity for any welder. “I drive my kids hard, but they come out of the class with a lot of confidence and self esteem because they discover they are tough,” she said.

When she’s not teaching, Walker works with the AWS OSTC-SE Welding Club Student Chapter. This year, Walker will be helping students volunteer with the Women Who Weld organization for a fundraising seminar. They’ll also be lending a hand for the local Girl Scout’s STEM night.

Walker is inspired by the great work her students do, as well as her school’s program. “I am very proud of my students,” she said. “I am proud to lead a program that offers an alternative type of career for students who are determined and motivated to make a good career for themselves.”