Karl Prados entered the welding industry straight out of high school when his dad, nicknamed “Pap,” got him a job at Twin Brothers Marine in Louisiana. Earning just $4.75 an hour in 2000, his interest in welding was fueled by his competitive nature.

“I guess it was in my blood. I was always a competitor since I was a kid; I hated to lose. I found it fun competing daily to always be better than the person next to me,” he explained.

For five years, Prados moved up the ranks, starting as a welder helper, then a short-arc welder, and eventually becoming a pipe mill foreman.

“I guess since my dad worked at the same place, I felt like I was obligated to prove through hard work that I wasn’t just ‘Pap’s son,’” he said. “I was a dedicated individual who worked his butt off with the goal of being the best.”

In 2005, he took a job at Chart Energy and Chemicals to explore new opportunities in welding and cryogenics. There, he learned how to use an Automig aluminum welding machine, and perform AC/DC gas tungsten arc welding. Before leaving the company in 2009, Prados became an AWS Certified Welding Inspector (CWI).

Prados decided to embark on a new career path after receiving a call from Jimmy Gravois, owner of Metal Shark Boats, who offered him a position as an aluminum welder and fitter. Nine years later, Prados is still with the company. He credits Gravois and his two sons, Brenden and Jon; David “Tboy” Chataignier; Buddy Stovall; and John Albert for making him into the boat builder and professional he is today.

Presently, Prados works as the general manager, CWI, of Metal Shark Boats’s Jeanerette, La., facility.

“Basically, I manage everything that has to do with production, from cutting, pressing, welding, painting, and outfitting, while still serving as the company’s single CWI,” he said.

When asked what he likes most about his job, Prados highlighted the ability to support his family — wife, Tara, and 8-year-old daughter, Bella. He also enjoys being able to play a large role in the planning that goes into a finished project, as well as having a close friendship with his boss, Jon.

“When he’s not working, Prados dedicates time to the AWS Acadiana Section. A 15-year AWS member, he has served the Section as membership/awards chairman since 2014. He thanks AWS District 9 Director Mike Skiles for encouraging him to take on an officer position within the Section.

“He was someone I’ve looked up to through my career and wanted to follow in his footsteps as a volunteer,” he said.

Prados’s Section work is also motivated by his desire to help with the welder shortage. He lists talking to high school and college students as his greatest contribution.

“Anything I can do for the welding industry, I strive to help. Numbers do not lie, so I know if people like myself don’t intervene with the next generation, the industry will be in even more trouble,” he said. “I consider myself to still be young, so I feel that the kids actually listen to what I am saying.”

However, Prados has not been without adversities, which he says have made him a more resilient, dedicated person. In 2009, when his wife was six months pregnant and bedridden, Prados was involved in a grinder accident that threatened his livelihood.

“This was a life changer and would have made the average person look for another trade to work in, but I was back on my feet in two months, at it again,” he explained.

Last year, Prados lost his 58-year-old father to a massive heart attack. He looks to his family and job for comfort, and lives every day according to his dad’s maxim to give to others.

“He was the person I always relied on for a laugh after a long, stressful day, and I didn’t have that anymore. I have turned to my family at home and work to push through each day that passes,” he affirmed. “If I’ve taken away anything from him, it is this: ‘If someone ever needs the shirt from your back, give it up. You never know when you will need a pair of pants.’”

AWS Celebrates Its Past by Focusing on the Industry’s Bright Future

The Welding Journal is celebrating its centennial by looking to the future and showcasing the welding industry’s young professionals. From January to December, 2019, Society News will profile AWS members under the age of 40 from each AWS District.

The following section profiles Karl Prados, Dist. 9, and Erick Speer, Dist. 10. To nominate an AWS member, contact Katie Pacheco at kpacheco@aws.org.
District 10 Member Profile

Growing up on the family farm in Pennsylvania, Erick Speer has been surrounded by welding ever since he could remember. He tried the craft for the first time at the age of 12 when his father taught him how to perform shielded metal arc welding using E6013 electrodes. At the time, Speer couldn’t imagine a career in welding.

“We were fixing some farrowing crates that were used in the pig barn, and I remember vividly thinking, ‘These sparks burn, and who would ever want to weld for a living?’” he said. “I joke now because it was my dad who taught me how to weld; now he usually asks me to weld things for him.”

Speer’s views changed when he transferred to a vocational high school and narrowed his areas of focus to two possibilities — welding or drafting. In the end, Speer said he chose welding because he “didn’t want to sit behind a computer screen all day drawing parts.” However, he also realized he didn’t want to weld all day either.

“As I approached the end of my high school career, I knew I had a love for welding, but I also knew that I didn’t want to physically weld for the rest of my life,” he explained. “I really enjoyed learning and I knew that I wanted to learn more about welding.”

Speer then pursued a degree in engineering, earning a bachelor’s in welding and fabrication engineering from Pennsylvania College of Technology in 2013. He credits the program for giving him the skills set needed to be successful in the field.

“Spending the first two years of the degree in the weld shop, learning all the different welding processes, is essential when it comes to relating to the welders on the shop floor,” he said. “In the type of industry that I work in, large scale fabricating and machining, it is important to have that hands-on experience.”

In 2013, Speer also competed in SkillsUSA, placing first at the state level for postsecondary welding and moving on to compete at the national level. “The SkillsUSA competition was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” he said. “Although I did not place in the top three at nationals, it was awesome to compete against the top welders in the nation.”

After college, Speer went on to secure a job with Custom Engineering Co. as a welding engineer. After a year, he was promoted to project manager, which allowed him to be “responsible for all aspects of a job, not just welding,” he explained. Seeing a need to further expand his experience and knowledge base, he decided to pursue a master’s in engineering management, and is slated to graduate this year.

Today, Speer is the company's assistant operations manager and welding engineer. He is also the company's AWS Certified Welding Inspector, which he lists as one of his proudest accomplishments. His job includes overseeing fabrication and production of ASME Section VIII Division I pressure vessels; working with customers to develop welding procedure specifications and procedure qualifications to various codes and specifications; managing and qualifying more than 50 welders; and assisting with the day-to-day operations of the company.

“...I enjoy the variety of work that we get. One day we might be building a large pressure vessel and the next day we could be building parts for amusement park rides,” he explained. “Sometimes this job is very challenging due to the constraints that our customers give us, but that is what I love about this industry — my welding engineering skills are put to the test.”

Speer is treasurer of the AWS Northwestern Pennsylvania Section, having previously served as secretary and membership chair. One of his tasks includes organizing the Section’s annual AWS golf outing, which attracts more than 100 people. His volunteer work is spurred by his gratitude to the Section for the scholarships it awarded him when he was a student.

“Volunteering within AWS at the local Section level is my way of giving back. My love for welding also pushes me to promote the welding industry through our local Section to ensure that this region of the country is getting young people involved with welding,” he said.

At 28 years young, Speer isn’t sure where his career will take him, but he feels confident that a career in the welding industry will lead to a comfortable life for him and his family. On his bucket list is the hope to one day serve as AWS president.

“Whenever I tell people this they usually laugh at me and roll their eyes, but one thing I have learned in my short career is that you cannot obtain a goal if you never set it,” he affirmed. “I know the road to become the [AWS] president is long, but I am willing to put in the time and effort to make it happen.”

Candidates Sought to Receive the MIT Masubuchi Award

The Prof. Koichi Masubuchi award, with a $5000 honorarium, is presented to one person, 40 or younger, who has made significant contributions to the advancement of materials joining technology in 2013. The award is sponsored annually by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Ocean Engineering.

Send a list of your candidate’s experience, publications, honors, awards, and at least three letters of recommendation from fellow researchers to Prof. Todd Palmer, tap103@psu.edu.