

PEORIA'S CTE RENAISSANCE

By Michael Brix

I have been a skilled trades worker for almost half of my life, but I never thought about teaching my craft to students. Then in May 2014, an opportunity to use my experience to help change students' lives practically landed in my lap. I haven't looked back since.

That spring, I was working at a Lowe's store in Peoria, Illinois, as a millwork salesperson when a colleague asked if I had ever thought about teaching a high school construction class. The principal of the local career tech center had left his card along with news that he was looking for someone with building and construction experience who could give students the kind of real-world, hands-on instruction they could not get by simply learning from a textbook.

I had plenty of experience. For 25 years I worked with Andersen Windows, first as part of a family-owned distributorship and then through my own corporation. I later branched out into building more generally at a local lumber yard before coming to Lowe's. But I had never taught before. I realized this was an opportunity to be the resource for students that I never had. I graduated from a rural high school in Illinois, and while most of my friends went to college, I knew that wasn't my path. But I had no counselor or teacher helping me find a career after high school or telling me about the many opportunities for students who want to start a career and make a great living.

Days after that principal left his card, I met with him and got a tour of Woodruff Career and Technical Center. Although the school had been open since 1937 as Woodruff High School, one of four Peoria high schools, it was closed in 2010 because of low enrollment and a lack of funding. A year later, it reopened with a new name as the hub for career and technical education (CTE) programs provided by the Peoria Public Schools (PPS) system for high school juniors and seniors. I saw the classrooms where students would learn skills for barbering, culinary arts, nursing, construction, and more. I listened as the principal explained that the goal of every CTE course is to expose students to careers that they might not know about otherwise so they can find something they're passionate about—and then give them the essential skills they need to succeed.

I loved it. I accepted the position right away and spent the summer getting my



A longtime construction industry professional and business owner, Michael Brix transitioned to career and technical education (CTE) in 2014. Since becoming a construction trades instructor at Woodruff Career and Technical Center in Peoria, Illinois, he has been central to Peoria's CTE renaissance. Currently, he teaches renewable energy and construction-focused work-based learning.

In 2015, the Peoria Federation of Teachers and the Greater Peoria Works campaign were awarded an AFT Innovation Fund grant supporting the Promising Pathways initiative to modernize CTE programs. The grant, which was augmented by funds from the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), was part of the AFT's longstanding advocacy for greater national attention to CTE to engage more students with real-world training

and academic content that expand their career opportunities and reduce educational inequities.

The AFT/IFT funds were used to build out the infrastructure for a regional career pathways system and enhance partnerships between Peoria Public Schools (PPS), community employers, and the local community college to increase career opportunities for students. PPS also added career pathways coordinators to help employers provide robust mentoring and support for CTE students. In three years, Peoria's CTE programs saw significant enrollment growth and increased work-based learning and internship opportunities. The funding also helped PPS implement a career planning system that created more than a dozen new CTE programs and increased student completion of industry-recognized credentials in automotive, health, and information technology fields, among others.* Building on the strength of this work, the IFT and other unions successfully fought for state legislation in 2021 creating green energy jobs and solar-in-schools funding, with extensive CTE connections.

Here, Brix describes becoming a CTE instructor, growing the program through collaboration and relationship building, and some exciting opportunities ahead.

—EDITORS

Michael Brix is a career and technical education teacher with the Peoria Public Schools and a union representative with the Peoria Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 780). After completing high school, he attended culinary school and worked as a chef. Transitioning to construction, he focused on windows and doors and then expanded into home building and remodeling. Now, he brings this wealth of career experience to his third profession as an educator. He is an Occupational Safety and Health Administration-authorized trainer and has earned the associate credential from the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners.

*For more on the expansion of CTE in Peoria through the AFT Innovation Fund grant, visit go.aft.org/9aq.

provisional credentials to teach. And in late August 2014, I walked through Woodruff's doors to begin the fall semester as a first-year construction teacher.

I had no idea what I was doing.

The curriculum was one construction book and my industry knowledge. I quickly found that it's one thing to know the best ways to frame a wall or assemble and install a ceiling fan, but it's another thing to show a group of 16-year-olds how to do it. And while I had help learning administrative tasks like taking attendance and entering grades, I had no mentor or colleagues to show me how to manage a classroom or get students engaged in learning. There were probably a couple of years that I wasn't a very good teacher because I just did not know how to be one. Luckily, a few of my students realized that I was brand new and were very supportive of me as I found my footing. And at home, my wife sacrificed countless evenings (and still does) to help me by proofreading my communications with students, families, and employers; setting up field trips; and supporting all the other work of teaching that continues long after the school day ends.

I discovered that a lot of teaching is about establishing a foundation of trust and building good relationships. My students became more engaged and involved as I spent time getting to know them. They learned to trust that I know the field and that I'm invested in doing all I can to help them get good jobs.

Expanding CTE in the Peoria Region

Like regions around the globe,¹ Illinois faces a critical shortage of skilled workers in fields such as advanced manufacturing and industrial maintenance and technology. These jobs are vital for a community's economic competitiveness—and especially so in our region, where skilled worker shortages were forcing employers to relocate.² Through hands-on, project-based CTE programs and pathways, students can acquire the 21st-century skills needed to compete in the workforce and support themselves and their families after graduating from high school. Along the way, they can also earn important credentials or licenses to advance in their careers or to further their education.

Equipping students with employment skills that they can turn into a career with or without college study gives them choices. In Woodruff's cosmetology program, for example, students learn advanced STEM

curriculum and molecular chemistry through the lens of cosmetology topics. They can sit for their state board licensure when they graduate high school, which allows them to work in a salon or start their own business—or to make money while going to college. Students in the nursing program frequently go this route. Most of them go on to nursing school, but when they enroll, they are already licensed and working as certified nursing assistants, which helps them pay for their education.

If students choose to go directly into the workforce, there is plenty of work available in our region. Right now, the union trades in Peoria are booming. Our bridges are in need of repair, so construction workers are in high demand, and Caterpillar (a major manufacturer of construction and mining equipment) is a key regional employer. In addition, it is very easy to become a union carpenter after graduation—and the job has an outstanding pay scale. The three large hospitals and cancer research center in our area all need healthcare workers and maintenance workers, and multimillion-dollar buildings for research and healthcare are continuing to be built. Our students can make a great living here.

Woodruff students have two primary CTE avenues to develop skills they can use in the workforce: project-based learning and work-based learning programs. My first years in the CTE program were spent teaching a project-based construction class, which is geared toward students who want to learn to build but are not necessarily interested in an industry career. After learning basic power tool safety and how to read a tape measure, juniors work on progressively complex building projects: pencil sharpeners, step stools, sawhorses, and benches. The next year, they learn to build a playhouse or a deck, or work on other basic construction projects.

For students who are interested in becoming a carpenter, electrician, or plumber after high school, senior year is spent in a work-based learning program. In the first semester, they are in the classroom learning about the industry, the trades in Illinois, and the type of work available. In the second semester, students no longer come to class; they are sent to local job sites as interns to learn more about the work and see if the job is a good fit. In the best cases, after graduation the students continue working for the employer they interned with.

Focusing on Peoria Public School Students

When I started teaching, work-based learning classes were provided through Peoria Educational Region for Employment and Career Training (PERFECT), which oversees CTE programs for many schools in the greater Peoria area. Although three of these classes were held at Woodruff, enrollment was open to students from all over the region, including several small, rural districts. PPS wanted to be involved in work-based learning, so I was contracted out as a PERFECT teacher, based at Woodruff, to teach work-based construction. Only four of my 20 students were enrolled in PPS; the majority drove from five rural high schools to attend. Many rural schools had no construction class, for lack of funding or student interest—Woodruff was the only option if these students wanted to become trade workers.

CTE gives students **SKILLS** to compete in the workforce and support themselves after high school.

PERFECT has done incredible work in our region to share resources across districts and connect students with quality CTE programming and employment skills. But at the end-of-year dinner following my second year of teaching through PERFECT, my superintendent pulled me aside. She pointed out that despite being one of the largest districts, PPS was significantly underrepresented in the proportion of students taking work-based learning classes and gaining employment after graduation. She wanted me to find a way to change that.

I spent the next months doing outreach for work-based learning. I traveled between Peoria's three high schools seeking students with any interest in the construction industry and explaining what the class was about and how we could help them get jobs right after high school. I also met with all the counselors to explain the program. Our counselors are responsible for getting students enrolled in the class, and I was surprised to find that most had no idea that work-based construc-

tion was an option for their students. These conversations paid off as we began to add more PPS students to the class. Based on word-of-mouth advertising and counselor recommendations, PPS enrollment grew from 4 students to 50, and our total school enrollment grew as well.

Equipping students with skills that they can turn into a **CAREER** with or without college gives them choices.

By 2016, and due to grants provided by the AFT and the state, our district was able to offer work-based learning to Peoria students directly as part of our career pathways system, and I left PERFECT to go back to teaching just PPS students. The funding also allowed PPS to expand the program to better accommodate our students' needs. We brought on career pathways coordinators to help prepare students with general workplace skills and to develop relationships with area employers and create more job opportunities. We also brought on a grant writer to further expand our CTE pathways and program offerings.

The district's work-based construction program was very similar to the class I taught under PERFECT. Because PERFECT had to coordinate numerous work sites and communication for students throughout the region, it already had an established curriculum and processes for participating in work-based learning. One notable change we made was restricting enrollment to high school seniors. PERFECT's class had also been available for juniors, and it was a great experience for them—perhaps a little *too* great. Several students did so well in their second semester internship experiences that their employers mistook them for seniors and offered them full-time jobs at the end of the year. We decided that offering work-based learning classes only to seniors would reduce confusion for our employers and, more importantly, eliminate potential barriers to completing high school for our students.

Because most of our work-based learning students do not want to go on to college

after high school, we also redesigned the internship experience for seniors to ensure they have a clear pathway to employment and do not miss out on the certifications or credentials that could help them advance in their careers. After students complete coursework covering key safety information and building skills in the first semester of senior year, our career pathways coordinator places them in internships with area employers. From February until graduation in May, I visit my students in their real-world “classrooms” and see the great things they are learning and doing.

Our interns receive a training wage in addition to academic credit. This “learn and earn” opportunity helps us partner with more employers to offer training and mentoring and increases access for students who would not otherwise participate because they need part-time employment to help support themselves and/or their families.³ And after graduation, most become full-time employees at their internship sites or make connections that lead to a job elsewhere. Many students also become apprentices and receive more formal training through their employer or Illinois Central College (ICC), which is our local community college, to master their trade.

With internships, students can assess their fitness for a certain field based on a true understanding of the nature of the work. During and after their three-month field experience, we ask students to reflect: “Is the work what you thought it would be? What misconceptions did you have about this job?” Some students learn that they made a mistake or that they don't enjoy the work like they thought they would. And that's not a bad thing. We would rather know early on that it is not working out so we can guide students to jobs they truly enjoy. When they find that right fit and an internship leads to a full-time job—which is the case for 90 percent of our construction work-based learning students—we all celebrate. At year's end, in addition to our formal dinner, we host a signing day for all the students who secured jobs to recognize their hard work and give special thanks to their employers. It's a wonderful way to honor both our students who are entering the workforce and our partnering employers who are helping them start rewarding careers.

An overwhelming majority of students are still working with our employers long after their graduation. I credit this to the

great work we do to match students to the right location and employer based on their interests and to our relationships with the employers that provide our students with diverse job opportunities. Because I've been in the industry so long and teaching CTE for several years now, I've either worked with our local employers for years or I've gotten to know them through our community outreach. I usually know the person supervising the job site or meeting with my students, so I know their expectations and quirks and can prepare my students long beforehand.

Our success in matching students to paid internships and connecting them to great careers after graduation—not only in construction but across all CTE programs at Woodruff—has been one of the greatest advertisements for our career pathways system. Every year through 2019, we experienced incredible growth; total enrollment was up to 500 students, more students than ever were participating in internships, and we nearly doubled the number of credentials and certifications students were earning by graduation.⁴

And then the pandemic hit.

Like most schools across the country, COVID-19 affected our student enrollment. With schools closed to in-person learning, we could no longer travel to area high schools to market our programs. Our total enrollment dropped to 350. In August 2020, Woodruff reopened to a form of in-person instruction. We teachers agreed that we could not continue to deliver online the quality instruction that we were used to providing our students. We had done our best for as long as we could, but there is no substitute for hands-on learning.

But even being back in person, our student learning activities were still constrained by the pandemic. From an extended winter break and low staffing because of the omicron wave to not having access to all of our typical job sites to place students, we struggled. Sometimes we had to combine classes because teachers were ill and we couldn't get substitutes, and other times we couldn't fill classes because of student illness.

Now that our students are back in the classroom and we hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we are working to regrow our programs and double our enrollment this school year. We are already seeing growth as we continually focus on creating new career pathways informed by the labor

market and students' interests, and we are collaborating with our career coordinators to find new employers and work-based learning opportunities.

New Career Pathway: Renewable Energy

For the past few years, I have been part of developing an exciting new career opportunity in renewable energy, which is a growing field that really interests our students. We first had the idea in 2019 when environmental groups won a lawsuit to shut down our local coal-fired power plant because of excessive and illegal pollution. As part of the settlement, the plant owners agreed to close operations in 2022 and provide \$8 million to the greater Peoria region for projects such as energy efficient building improvements, job training, and asthma and lung health education programs.⁵

My principal and I attended community meetings where we learned that the funds would be dispersed through grants to fund clean energy projects that included solar panels. We considered how solar panels could benefit Woodruff—they would help offset the costs of operating the building, and we could also make some much-needed improvements like adding air conditioning. But we saw our students as the biggest beneficiaries of the project, as they could have a front row seat to learn how solar energy works.

From there, the idea of a two-year renewable energy training program grew, and we discovered there was a huge interest from our students and community. We applied for a grant, and in summer 2021 we were awarded \$1.5 million to install solar panels at Woodruff and start a renewable energy program so our students can explore this career field.

Our programs are growing with new career pathways informed by the **LABOR MARKET** and students' interests.

I was asked to leave one of my work-based construction classes to teach renewable energy. There was just one problem: I knew little about renewable energy. After some research, I found an online program and began taking courses to learn everything I could about solar, wind, and electric energy and develop our program curriculum.

At the same time, we were recruiting students for the first class to be held in fall 2021, coinciding with the installation of the solar panels so that we could use them as an

A NEW VISION FOR CTE

We have a lot of work to do in America to prosper in the 21st century. Reengineering our economy to be competitive and fight climate change while reinvesting in rural areas. Learning the lessons of COVID-19 by making our economy and our healthcare system more resilient. Developing tens of millions of new skilled workers of every kind and making sure every craft and profession welcomes all of us.

Preparing students for full lives—enriched by meaningful, rewarding work and by knowledge itself—is the shared goal of educators, public schools, and unions. Part of realizing that goal is making college affordable for all, and an equal part requires resetting and realigning CTE to lead to greater opportunities for all students.

Imagine, for a moment, if students in high school were earning industry credentials that today's employers need, so that high school students could launch careers with valuable skills. Imagine an economy with recognized industry credentials in everything from tech to hospitality to farming. Imagine if, as a delegation of AFT local and state leaders and I saw during a recent study trip to Germany, high school students could explore the world of work through paid internships and apprenticeships that connect them to employers in their communities and open doors to future education and rewarding careers.

We can make this new vision—in which all high school students have access to CTE programs that provide industry certifications, internships, and apprenticeships—a reality by coordinating workforce and economic development with our legacy educational aid programs. The key is aligning high school, public technical and community college, and business, with a focus on what the public institutions can do to prepare young adults and career changers for the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

The American Federation of Teachers has done some of this work already, using our Innovation Fund to help create the Peoria programs that Michael Brix describes and to support the transformation of Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh. The AFT has also worked with IBM on its P-TECH model. And locals such as the United Federation of Teachers in New York City have been doing this work for decades. The issue now is scale. And we can only achieve that scale through labor, business, and government working together.

Today, we can see everywhere the challenges we face as a nation and the scale of the work we need to do. We have young people desperate to take action on issues ranging from climate change to broad-based economic prosperity in which no one gets left behind. But they need the tools. To fight climate change, we need skilled



AFT President Randi Weingarten and a delegation of AFT leaders tour a German vocational education and training program focused on automotive technology.

construction, tech, utility, transportation, and manufacturing workers. For broad-based prosperity, we need to break down the barriers that keep young people of color from getting the skills and credentials we all need to succeed. We must ensure rural America is not abandoned. We need to rebuild neighborhoods and communities. Bringing those skills to young people is what the American Federation of Teachers is about, and it is what will determine our nation's future.

—AFT President Randi Weingarten



Investing in our students pays dividends in the **SUCCESS** of our community for years to come.

instructional tool. A class size of 18 is pretty good for CTE, but we were able to enroll 22 students with little advertising. And in their first semester, students watched as 545 solar panels were installed on the roof of Woodruff's two gymnasiums. They were able to speak to electricians and follow the entire process to learn proper placement of panels, panel frames, and wiring. We also started to learn about renewable energy, basic skills in electrical technology and mechanical systems, and sustainable environmental practices with an emphasis on global issues. The panels were turned on over our winter break, and by the end of the 2021–22 school year, the system produced about 37 percent of the power needed to operate our school—which informed the next semester's curriculum.

As we were initially developing the program, we thought the greatest workforce need would be for solar installers, but we quickly learned that installation is just a small portion of the work in this field. The bigger part is assessing electrical usage and determining how it can be lowered, which guides solar installation. So in the beginning of the second semester, students learned how to recognize and measure energy usage patterns, how to monitor energy production, and how to assess a building's electrical use. Then we transitioned to focusing on electric cars, particularly their batteries, and the use of renewable energy (instead of gasoline) for vehicles. Since 2017, our region

has been home to Rivian, an electric vehicle plant that is rapidly expanding and has an order to build 100,000 Amazon delivery vehicles.⁶ We're aiming to prepare our students for jobs there. We also devoted time to learning about wind turbines because central Illinois is home to several wind turbine farms (and solar fields) that are now supplying electricity previously produced by the coal plant.

In our first year, we were still operating under some pandemic constraints, which made work-based learning—and our original curriculum design—very challenging. We had to make several adjustments to students' learning experiences because we were not able to offer field trips to local employers or introduce students to renewable energy through wind turbines and electric vehicles in a hands-on way. Even with these challenges, our students have been excited to learn about the possibilities of renewable energy.

As we continue to move into a post-pandemic normal through COVID-19 mitigation practices, we believe year two of the program will bring even more meaningful opportunities for students in this fast-growing field. By the time they graduate high school, students will receive certifications in first aid, CPR, and OSHA 30 (a 30-hour course on construction safety by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration), and they will be eligible for entry-level positions in renewable energy systems installation, solar energy analysis, solar design, solar power plant construction, project estimating or engineering, and environmental planning.

Shaping Peoria's Future

It has been seven years since the day I nervously welcomed students to my first construction class. Much about our program—and the world—has changed since then. What has not changed is my focus on building relationships in my teaching. I keep in touch with my students and get updates on their lives and career moves for years after they leave my classroom.

I have dozens of stories of students who finished the program and went on to be loyal employees, become leaders in their field, or even start their own businesses. One story is of Brian Monckton, a bright and artistic student who was struggling in school because of medical issues that made regular class attendance difficult. His mother encour-

aged him to try CTE, and he enrolled in my project-based construction class. I spent time talking and connecting with him, and because I understood his need for flexibility, I worked with him to get his classroom learning in when his health allowed it.

During our time together, Brian learned how to measure and cut wood, and he also took the lead on a project to build beautiful benches for a local homeowners association. Because he was a musician at heart, he moved to Arizona after graduation and enrolled in a trade school to continue working with wood—building guitars. Today, Brian builds custom guitars full time, and he is very successful. CTE helped him develop the skills to turn his passion into a career that he loves.

One of my favorite stories is of a student named Kianna Pittman, who enrolled in my class because she heard it was “fun.” On one of our field trips, we toured an aluminum foundry, which makes parts for things like industrial equipment and recreational vehicles. It's a growing industry, but it's not many students' first choice for a career. The work is very challenging; it involves heating blocks of aluminum in a large pot at a couple hundred degrees, side by side with 150 to 175 other employees—predominantly male—in a large, hot, smelly open space. But Kianna saw all this and said, “This is where I want to be.”

At 17 years old, Kianna was one year shy of the minimum age requirement to work in the foundry. But she was so determined that she told the company, Alcast, that she would wait and work nights at a local restaurant until her birthday. Kianna was living with her grandmother and had no car; Alcast was concerned about her riding public transportation late at night and about the added stress of completing homework after her shift. So the human resources department rewrote its policies to offer her an office job until she turned 18 and could work on the foundry floor.

I visited Kianna at the foundry about two years ago, and she drove me around the grounds and showed me all she was doing as a maintenance mechanic. I understood little of it, but it was clear that she knows and truly enjoys this work. Alcast has continued to invest in her—including providing her transportation to work and paying for her to complete her associate degree—and she has become an incredibly valued employee. It's wonder-

ful to see Kianna's career taking off and to see her giving back to our school community by sharing her experiences with and encouraging those students coming after her. Not only does she oversee and train the students we send to Alcast for internships, but in May 2022 she was also the guest speaker at our year-end dinner for work-based learning students and their families and employers. She is making us all proud.

Peoria has been called a model for CTE, and I believe it is because of success stories like Brian's and Kianna's. All of us—from the classroom teachers and career coaches to the employers and education and funding partners—truly care about these students. And we know that an investment in them pays dividends in the well-being and success of our community for years to come.

As we continue to develop our renewable energy program and other career pathways for Peoria students, the future is bright—and we need look no further than our graduates to understand why. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/brix.

WHAT CTE MEANS TO ME

BY KIANNA PITTMAN

I was introduced to career and technical education (CTE) when I was a high school senior questioning what I wanted to do with my life after graduation. I wasn't sure college was an option, but I'd spent most of my junior and senior years looking for jobs with no success. It seemed nothing was turning out right for me.

Then I met Ms. Chapman, the career coordinator at Woodruff Career and Technical Center. She came to my school to talk about the CTE programs available to students. Ms. Chapman told me that with CTE classes, and specifically classes in the construction trades, I could get a paying job while still in school. I'd always wanted a career in construction trades; I just didn't know how to get my foot in the door.

I enrolled in Mr. Brix's work-based construction course. To be honest, the initial classwork—spending most of our days on computers getting our OSHA 30 certification—was not my favorite. But we needed to be ready for whatever job we might want to have. We received our forklift and CPR certifications and completed other training, and then things got exciting as we started taking field trips to potential job sites.

One day we visited Alcast Company, which manufactures aluminum castings. The plant's five buildings include a computer numerical control machine shop and a foundry, where metal is melted into giant hot pools and molded into castings for parts supplied to customers like Caterpillar and Amazon. There's also a core building,

where workers make the sand cores that fit inside the metal molds, and a finishing building, where the parts are sanded or grinded down until they're perfect and ready for shipping. And then there's the maintenance department, with technicians who are trained to maintain and repair all the plant's machines. Everything I saw was so cool. I knew immediately that I needed to work there.

It was not the obvious career choice. The work is hard, the foundry is hot, and I was the only woman in all of the buildings I'd toured. I'd been one of few girls in the construction course as well, which was difficult at times. But at Alcast, I didn't see an obstacle; I saw an opportunity. Women can do this work too. Someone just needed to open the door and make a way for others. I wanted to be that person.

Mr. Brix helped me get an internship so I could see if Alcast was truly a good fit. I was only able to finish half of the internship before everything closed because of the pandemic. But Alcast reached out to me; they were still open, and if I was interested in working, they had a position for me. Of course I was interested! I did general office work until I turned 18, then transitioned to maintenance. The work is complicated and challenging, and there's no room for error. But I never lacked help. My boss and coworkers were always there to answer my questions, and even though I was no longer in school, Mr. Brix was also there for me, willing to help however I needed.

It's been two years now, and I love what I do. No two days are the same, the work is constant, and every day I challenge myself to learn and grow. I've accomplished my goal of opening the door for other women here, and I take time to greet the women now working throughout the plant. There are only a handful of us, but we support each other. And Alcast is paying for me to go to school for my associate degree in industrial



CTE gives you the skills to create a great **FUTURE** for yourself.

applied sciences. My days are long and busy; between classes and work, I regularly put in 11- to 14-hour days. But I'm not afraid of hard work, and I know what an amazing opportunity I've been given.

That's why I didn't hesitate when Mr. Brix asked me to speak at Woodruff's year-end dinner. Because of him, I've met so many wonderful people and made great connections, and I'm thriving in my job. I want to make that kind of difference in other students' lives. So I told the graduating students the same thing I tell those who come to tour or intern at Alcast: CTE shows you what's possible and gives you the skills to create a great future for yourself—you just have to be willing to put in the work.

I don't know what's next for me. I could pursue more education with an engineering degree or spend 20 years just learning how to do this job the best I can. I do know that I'm grateful Ms. Chapman and Mr. Brix found me. College may not be for everyone, but a career is. And getting an early start on a career through CTE changed my life. □

Kianna Pittman is a former student of Woodruff Career and Technical Center and a graduate of Manual High School in Peoria, Illinois. After a Woodruff internship with a leading local manufacturing plant in the spring of 2020, Kianna accepted full-time employment at the plant. She is currently completing an associate degree in industrial applied sciences.