

# Graduating teens find work in in-demand field

By David Hurst

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Somerset County Technology Center students Andrew Findley (left) and Russell Persuhn hold up their signed commitment letters to go to work for Riggs Industries Inc. during the inaugural career signing day on Thursday, May 31, 2018, at the school.

By Todd Berkey

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SOMERSET – For many of Andrew Findley’s Somerset Area classmates, graduation means signing on to four more years of school – and a pile of college debt.

But Findley had something else in mind Thursday as he scribbled his signature onto an acceptance letter at Somerset County Technology Center.

“A paycheck,” he said with a grin. “I’m ready to start earning money.”

The Friedens area teen and fellow technology center student Russell Persuhn accepted jobs as welders with Riggs Industries as part of a “signing day” event at the school.

Through a cooperative effort among the tech center, Riggs and The Challenge Program Inc., both students have spent the last several months working alongside trained professionals learning the in-demand trade, according to Shawn Kaufman, Riggs’ human resources director.

It means they’ll be able to start working – and making money – “right away,” he said.

And if they work hard, they’ll earn a salary in the \$30,000s a year from now – and the guarantee of a strong benefits package.

“Russ and Andy impressed their supervisors at J&J, so we offered them jobs,” he said. “We think the future is bright for them.”

“We’re so happy to share this moment with them,” added Somerset County Technology Center Director Karen Remick.

Findley graduates from Somerset Area this month.

Persuhn, a Berlin area resident, will graduate from Shanksville-Stonycreek.

The young men will be working at Riggs’ J&J Truck Bodies subsidiary in mid-June. They’ll earn a living as part of a busy workforce that assembles dump truck bodies and steel and aluminum trailers, Kaufman said.

To Barbara Grandinetti, it’s a milestone worth celebrating – for both the students and Riggs.

Grandinetti, The Challenge Program’s president, said Thursday’s signing day was patterned after ones honoring high school students for committing to play for college sports powerhouses.

“Why not celebrate jobs, too?” she asked.

Grandinetti is hopeful the event will shine a light on the local demand for new hires in manufacturing fields such as welding “to make sure students today know where the jobs are.”

“For 20 years, we stopped feeding young people into the trades, now we’re playing catch-up,” she said.

Kaufman understands that better than most.

Riggs has been forced to turn away contracts because the company doesn’t have a large enough workforce to handle the work, he said.

“We’re at a critical point,” he said, noting that experienced welders are retiring across the nation every day.

It’s compelled Riggs officials to rethink how they attract and recruit workers, he said – and he’s optimistic that partnerships with The Challenge Program and Somerset County Technology Program are a vital piece of the puzzle.

On Thursday, Kaufman flashed a smile as he shook hands with Findley and Persuhn and then stood alongside their parents to pose for photographs with them.

“These two young men are trailblazers,” he said. “We hope they are the first of many to take this route.”

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