

# Local 400 Youth Apprenticeship Program

## *Paving the Way to a Bright Future*



Ashwaubenon High School Technical Education Teacher Jeremie Meyer, left, is pictured with Russ Coble.

Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 400, Appleton, WI, takes pride in its Youth Apprenticeship Program, which is entering its fifth year. The idea for the Youth Apprenticeship Program began at a strategic planning committee meeting at which members brainstormed about ways they could do more outreach to high school students.

Business Manager Jeff Knaus thought it would be a great idea if high school students could become youth members of the local and were able to be exposed to the full benefits of what being a union member offers. It would reveal the training that is offered and give them an opportunity to participate in local union events planned for members and their families.

“Hopefully they see a value in that, but the bigger picture is that they see the value in Local 400, and they realize that this is the career path they want to go down, said Brother Knaus. “It also gives us an opportunity to showcase the facility to the parents, who are just as important, and to convince them that the pathway or the career opportunities within the pipe trades are just as valuable as a four- or five-year college degree.”

High school students involved in the program are working for participating contractors part-time during the school year and full-time during the summer. They pay a minimal amount in

union dues—five cents an hour in union dues, and five cents an hour that goes into the education fund. Local 400 covers the per capita. Brother Knaus explained that the intention is to let them get acclimated with Local 400 and give them an idea of what a career path could look like, what we can offer, and if they decide this is the career path they want to go down, then hopefully, they’ll be that much closer to getting that apprenticeship when they graduate from high school.”

“If these students find out this isn’t for them, then that’s fine,” Brother Knaus explained. “Then we cancel everything out. I think it’s just as important to know what you don’t want to do as it is to know what you do want to do. I always tell the students that college is not for everyone and neither is the pipe trades, but it’s a great opportunity to expose young people to a career that can pay very well, has excellent benefits, and offers endless opportunities within the United Association.”



Pictured are Local 400 Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator DJ Kloida and Russ Coble.

“I had every trades instructor, a couple of math teachers, counselors, the principal, and the assistant principal come up to me at my booth, shake my hand, and say, ‘We are so grateful that you are here. We have so many students who don’t want to go the four-year college route, and this is an option for them.’”

– Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator DJ Kloida

The program started off so well that they decided to hire an individual part-time to help grow the program. In 2016, DJ Kloida became the Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator after an accident took him out of the field as a steamfitter.

“Being a member of the local is just amazing,” Brother Kloida said. “There are different opportunities that you can tap into, and lo and behold, I acquired a position that wasn’t even in existence three years ago.”

DJ Kloida explained that he felt like a rock star at the very first high school career fair he went to, adding, “I had every trades instructor, a couple of math teachers, counselors, the principal, and the assistant principal come up to me at

my booth, shake my hand, and say, ‘We are so grateful that you are here. We have so many students who don’t want to go the four-year college route, and this is an option for them.’”

He said interest grew. “The apprenticeship program is a great opportunity, especially for young people who will incur no debt like many do going to college,” Brother Kloida added.

Local 400 decided to take the program one step further by purchasing a mobile training trailer with grant money they received from AT&T. They furnished the mobile training trailer with visuals, tooling equipment, and some machines, and take it to the high schools to show the students more hands-on skills.

“Bringing students visuals so they can see a



good weld or how we put something together is better than handing out brochures and then listening to me talk,” said Brother Kloida.

He talked about the long-term value of this program and how he wished it had been available when he was in high school.

“This program was not around when I was in high school,” Brother Kloida said. “Unless you knew someone in the trades or someone who could guide you into the trades, you didn’t know about it. Now, with the Youth Apprenticeship Program, at 16 years old, you’re in. You could potentially be with a contractor that’s going to grant you an apprenticeship shortly after you graduate from high school, and the money you will make as a registered apprentice is out of this world.”

DJ Kloida is the main point of contact for the high school students in this program. Russell “Russ” Coble, a student in the Local 400 Youth Apprenticeship Program graduated from Ashwaubenon High School in Green Bay, WI. Immediately after graduation in May 2019, Russ started working for a signatory contractor of Local 400, Straightline Refrigeration, which is located in Appleton. He is now on the path to becoming a steamfitter apprentice with them.

Russ heard about the Youth Apprenticeship Program from his technical education teacher at Ashwaubenon, Jeremie Meyer, who handed out pamphlets about the program that he received from Brother Kloida. He told his students that the union could be a career option for those who were trying to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives.

After Russ looked into the program and talked to Brother Kloida, he became even more interested. He went to the Local 400 open meeting, toured the facility, and talked to some of the members.

“You get paid to go to school and learn on the job,” he said. “It has great benefits, and I get to work with my hands welding. I was very interested and signed up.”

Russ added that he knew some family friends in unions, but no one had ever talked to him about it until his teacher did. He said he would most definitely recommend the program to his friends.

Jeremie Meyer’s dad was a welder and a union millwright, so he grew up with the trades and said that when he became a teacher 24 years ago, becoming a technical education teacher was

a natural progression for him.

Ashwaubenon High School has one of the best welding programs in Northeast Wisconsin, with three instructors and 800 students enrolled in the program.

“To give students a proper education, they need hands-on, real-world experience, and that’s what our program offers, along with the Youth Apprenticeship Program,” Jeremie Meyer said. “We pride ourselves on making sure we are doing the best we can with what we have, and helping students make a good career choice by graduation.”

As a result, he believes that not all students need or want to go to college, and that working with Local 400 provides paid apprenticeships and offers no student loan debt, which is a win-win for students.

“These kids are coming out with opportunities that we didn’t have 20 years ago, and it’s amazing what these kids have at their feet,” Jeremie Meyer said, adding that he is looking forward to continuing to work with Local 400.

Jeremie Meyer got his students involved with Local 400 and the Youth Apprenticeship Program through the “Kick Off Your Future” event they have held for the last two years. This year, they held the event at its training center to showcase Local 400’s training facility, and students from 17 high schools competed. The contestants constructed their own field goal project using 10 feet of two-inch carbon pipe and the welding process of their choice. The students welded, primed, painted, and assembled their field goal structure.

“Last year, I received an email from DJ Kloida about their ‘Kick Off Your Future’ competition, and we decided to participate,” Jeremie Meyer remembered. “When I received the email about this year’s competition, we said, ‘Let’s try it again.’”

This year, Ashwaubenon won first place. Commenting on his team’s big win, he said, “It’s a testament to our students’ skill level and dedication, and we are grateful to Local 400’s leadership for providing our students with this tremendous learning



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— Ashwaubenon High School  
Technical Education Teacher  
Jeremie Meyer



Local 400 mobile training trailer

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– Local 400 Business Manager  
Jeff Knaus

experience, as well as for the opportunity to participate in their Youth Apprenticeship Program.”

Local 400 has partnered with the Mechanical Contractors Association and Miller Electric in choosing a high school of the month that is promoting the trades in its technical education department. Each winner receives a welding machine, courtesy of Miller Electric.

“We’ve held three of them so far,” said Business Manager Knaus, “including the ‘Kick Off Your Future’ event. We really want to reward the high schools that are doing the right things to provide more interest in the pipe trades industry. It’s a great opportunity for us to give back to the community and to also recognize those high schools.”

Brother Knaus said the challenge with the program is having 90 high schools within the 18-county jurisdiction of Local 400.

“With 90 high schools, there aren’t always opportunities for every high school,” he stated. “We’re limited to the job locations and job

opportunities, and the program is growing. There are more students who want to be in the program than there are contractors willing to hire 16- and 17-year-old students.”

Brother Knaus said they are reaching out to the rural areas, especially if a high school has an expansion going on. “The strategy has created some good opportunities for students, because contractors are performing the work at the school. The program works to match the students with contractors willing to participate,” he said.

Brother Knaus says he is very proud of the fact that the membership sees the need for this program and has supported and valued it. “It was an ‘outside of the box’ idea of how to bring in more United Association and Local 400 members,” he said. “It’s not the only thing we’re doing, but I think collectively all of these ideas need to be looked at. Maybe it doesn’t work for everybody, but it certainly seems to be working for us.”

