

BPPOS

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Publishing Headquarters:

International Association of
Plumbing & Mechanical Officials

4755 E. Philadelphia Street
Ontario, CA 91761-2816 USA

Phone: 909.472.4100
Fax: 909.472.4150

www.iapmobpps.org

Managing Editor

Cindy Most
Phone: 540-858-2686
Cindy.Most@iapmo.org

Editor / Graphic Designer

Benjamin Ryan
Ben.Ryan@asse-plumbing.org

Graphic Designer

Tim denHartog
Tim.denHartog@iapmo.org

Contributing Writers

Doug Taylor
Mark Inman
Sean Cleary
Donald M Jones

Advertising

1517 Chastain Road
Johns Island, SC 29455

Phone 855-536-2800
Fax: 909-354-3647
Kim.Curtis@iapmo.org
Cindy.Most@iapmo.org

The Plumbing, Mechanical, and Water Industries



BY SEAN CLEARY

Vice President of Operations
IAPMO Backflow Prevention Institute

We are looking for men and women who would like to work in our industry. In a country with an aging infrastructure in dire need of repair we have another major issue. Our skilled workforce necessary to complete the much-needed update of our long-neglected waste, water, transportation and power systems is being depleted by the advanced age of tradesmen and women. The average age of individuals working in these industries is estimated to be between 50 and 55 years of age. There are several factors at work here but one thing is clear - we are looking at a shortage of workers in the very near future. As I look back on my start in the trade, it is surprising how things have changed.

When I became a first-year plumbers apprentice in 1978, things were a little different then. I remember going for my interview at United Association Plumbers Local 90 in Scranton, PA. The Local was going to take in a class of 20 apprentices and they had more than three hundred applicants to choose from. As an 18-year-old recent high school graduate, I was a feeling a little intimidated while looking around the meeting hall and waiting for my interview. I saw people there who ranged in age from my 18 years to people in their early 30s. There were high school graduates, people with some college education and others with college degrees. There were people there who had family members in the trade, people with several years' experience, people with no experience, and people with everything in between. The Union had scheduled everyone for interviews



Competitors at the Pennsylvania UA apprenticeship contest

the same day with half of the three hundred plus scheduled to arrive at 8 a.m. and the rest at 1 p.m. It was a mad house. I saw several of my classmates from the local Vo-Tech plumbing program and a few individuals I had met on jobs working for my uncle's plumbing company over the summers when I was in high school. We were all hoping for one of those 20 open spots. The interview I had was brief and the questions were delivered rapid fire from three different people. The one question I remember was when I was asked why I wanted to become a plumber and why I was not headed to college? I mentioned that I had spent the last few summers working for my uncle's plumbing company and enjoyed the feeling of building things and that I hoped to someday own my own business. I left the Union Hall that day wondering if I had made an impression at the interview and if I would be one of the lucky ones.

Several months later I received a letter from UA Local 90 in the mail. When I opened, it I found that I had been accepted as an apprentice and would start school in September. When school began, I found that at 19 years of age, I was the youngest person in the class, which ranged from ages from 19 to 28. Several of the other apprentices had already served in the military, others had worked in the trade for a several years. Over the course of my apprenticeship, I learned as much from these individuals as I did from the instructors in the class. Each of us were grateful for the opportunity to work in the industry, and for most of us, the trade has given us a career that has allowed us to provide for our families and live a comfortable, middle-class life.

Fast forward to where we are today and the problems we have attracting people to our industries. I have seen

Mike Rowe, and others on television and the internet, speaking about how most parents, school counselors, and others encourage individuals to always plan on attending college after high school. In many cases, people do not look to the trades, to technical training or apprenticeships as a post-secondary educational opportunity or career path for young people.

There are two problems with this approach. The first problem is the thought that everyone needs a four-year college degree to be successful. The second problem is the idea that technical training or apprenticeship training is not equal to the education one receives in college. The thinking in both these statements is completely incorrect. The truth is that some form of post-secondary education is by far the best route for most individuals looking for not just a job but for a rewarding career. Apprenticeships today are a necessary

“...we need to recruit the best and the brightest to follow behind us in the work we do.”

form of post-secondary education. Many apprenticeship programs today provide college credits as part of their training programs and encourage their apprentices to complete the necessary courses that will allow them to both complete their apprenticeship and receive an associate or bachelor's degree from an accredited college.

In my own family, I have seen this play out over the years. My wife is a school counselor in a public-school district. Because of our own history together she has a better understanding of the way apprenticeship training programs work, of the strict guidelines and educational requirements that are in place. She saw the program firsthand as a result of my being an instructor in our local union program, then as she saw me attend and graduate from the United Association Instructor Training Program. She has also seen it from the student's view, as my youngest son Michael recently completed a five-year pipefitter apprenticeship at UA Local 524. Michael had attended college and received an associate degree while he waited for the opportunity to enter the apprenticeship program and I am very proud that my son has followed me into the industry that I have had the honor of working in for so many years.


My two older sons took different paths with one becoming a school teacher and the other a policeman. It is important that parents respect the decisions that their children make about their futures and careers, however it is also important that

everyone involved understand the opportunities that exist in the workforce today.

I was recently at a social event where I ran into a member of my original apprenticeship class. He is a third-generation plumber who is running the business started by his grandfather. As we spoke, I mentioned to him that my son was finishing up his apprenticeship and would be a journeyman in September. He expressed his fear that his business may end with him since he had no one in the family continuing in the trade. As we spoke, another person in the group took up the conversation and mentioned that the problem today was that young people don't want to work hard and they expect everything to be given to them. I think I heard people say this same thing about my generation and I am sure my parents heard the same thing from the generation before them. It was not true then and it's not true now. I have worked with young people in youth sports, scouts, and as an apprenticeship instructor and can say with conviction that the current generation is as passionate about life and have the same vision and drive that my generation had. They just need opportunity and direction.

I know it took a while, but let me get to the point of this editorial. We need to start today to work to bring young people into our industry. We need our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our friend's children, and every young person we meet to understand the opportunities available for them in the industries we work in. We also need to work with school counselors and others to make this information available to anyone who wants it. These people need to understand the importance of apprenticeship and technical education so they have the ability to pass that information on to the individuals they counsel and mentor.

In every class I teach and every group I speak with I point out the importance of the work we do and that we need to recruit the best and the brightest to follow behind us in the work we do. We need more plumbers and less future reality TV stars. Please take this to heart and get the message out. Please reach out to your local schools, youth groups and other organizations to let them know that opportunities exist not just for a job, but for a lifelong career and unlimited educational prospects for future growth. We are looking for more than a few good men and women to be the future of our industries and carry on the vital work we do. Join us and get this message out.

As President Barack Obama once said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek.” 



Sean Cleary at his son Michael's graduation. Sean is a 39 year member of the United Association Local 524 Scranton Pa. He has worked in all phases of the plumbing and mechanical industry and is a licensed master plumber. Sean is a Past President of the American Society of Sanitary Engineering. Sean is also the member of the ASSE Cross-Connection Control, Technical Committee. Sean is employed by IAPMO as the Vice President of Operations for the IAPMO Backflow Prevention Institute.