

## Building Futures at Cianbro

By Ellen C. Lamb

Three years ago, Pittsfield-based construction company Cianbro faced a major challenge. The company had received a multimillion-dollar, 15-month contract to help build the nation's first new oil refinery in more than 30 years, a major expansion of Motiva Enterprises' Port Arthur Refinery. The project would require not only a new facility — a 41-acre site in Brewer that had formerly been the headquarters of the Eastern Fine Paper Company — but a major infusion of personnel: 200 welders and 100 pipefitters. Cianbro had ten months to find and train the people they needed.

“We ran welding training programs for twelve straight weeks, 40 hours a week at nine different locations,” said Steven M. Pound, Associate Director of the Cianbro Institute - Strategic Alliances. A former superintendent of schools in Greenville and university instructor, Pound knew that the company was cramming “a couple of years' worth of training” into mere months. He started looking for ways to recognize and reward that training, while sharing curriculum and instructors with other local providers, including area colleges. Among other benefits, it would be “one more step” to encourage employee education, as part of Cianbro's commitment to the Maine Employers' Initiative.

The result was an agreement between Cianbro and Eastern Maine Community College of Bangor to award college credit for the training Cianbro provides its employees in electrical work, pipefitting, millwright work and welding. Under the agreement, Cianbro employees can

earn up to 24 college credit hours toward an Associate's Degree – General Technology.

Among the first to take advantage of the program was Brewer native Shane McPherson, who joined Cianbro in 2007 as a carpenter and completed the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER)'s pipefitters' certification program in November 2009.

The training, offered at Cianbro, took six months: one week in the classroom, alternating with three weeks in the field. At the end of the program, McPherson not only passed the NCCER certification test but also qualified to compete in a statewide pipefitting competition, where he placed second.



McPherson, a 1997 graduate of Brewer High School, joined the Army after graduation. His Army service made him eligible for funds to go back to school full time, but McPherson was eager to get back to work: “I don't think I'd be much of a full-time student,” he said. “I've just always preferred to have a full-time job — it makes me more comfortable to have a steady income.” That didn't mean he

didn't want to keep learning, however, and the offer of college credit for professional training seemed a golden opportunity. With the additional support of Cianbro's reimbursement for tuition and books, McPherson looks forward to earning his associate's degree in General Technology. He'll start classes at Eastern Maine Community College in September, assembling a portfolio of his life experiences that he hopes will help him advance at Cianbro.

“The fact that Cianbro has offered such a good deal has made people take another look” at higher education, McPherson said. “I didn't think I needed a higher education to pursue a

career in construction, but the way businesses work today, they need people with more knowledge.”

That’s the driving force behind these initiatives, said Steve Pound. Cianbro, an employee-owned corporation, is committed to educating its work force not only to help employees with their own career paths, but because it’s good business practice. “This is about having relevant educational experience because we want our people to be the best,” he said. “With the training, we’re going to get the jobs.” The partnership with EMCC was just the beginning; Cianbro is now exploring a similar partnership in online training with Kennebec Valley Community College, to offer employees credit for in-house training in business, marketing, and possibly computer science/IT. Discussions are also underway about a partnership with the University of Maine-Augusta. “It’s really mushrooming into a whole series of things for career development — not just training for what employees are doing now, but offering them career development paths for lifelong learning,” Pound said. The Maine Development Foundation recognized Cianbro’s efforts with its very first “Champion of Employee Education” award in September 2009.

McPherson certainly has plans for his own career path. “I don’t see myself spending the next 20 years behind a grinder,” he said. Inspired by his own pipefitting instructor, Tony Ayotte, McPherson wants to become a trainer himself. “I absolutely love sharing the knowledge I’ve gained with my co-workers,” he said. That means more time in the classroom and “a lot more time in my trade.” Looking ahead to future coursework, he plans to take classes not only in metallurgy and advanced trigonometry — “trigonometry plays a large part in pipefitting” — but in English and American Sign Language as well.

“It’s exciting, because I never really considered going back to college to earn a degree,” he said. “I’ve been trying to be conscious of what will help Cianbro or a future employer, but I also think about what will interest me.”

According to Steve Pound, that’s the point of Cianbro’s program. By securing Cianbro’s employees college credit for the knowledge they already have, “we’re allowing people to concentrate on the things they need to learn,” he said. “We all have to work together to keep our people developing.”