

# THE PRESS OF ATLANTIC CITY

## **Career Day teaches students how to become employees**

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February 28, 2017

Victor Dompierre always knew he wasn't college material.

"I was always a hands-on person," said Dompierre, owner of an interior design firm in Upper Township that bears his name. After graduating from a vocational school in Massachusetts, he worked as a graphic artist, then a costume designer at the Showboat casino hotel for 13 years, before eventually starting his own interior design business.

"My journey from where I started to where I am now is very different," he told students at Atlantic County Institute of Technology Tuesday. "You don't always know where your path will take you, but keep an open mind."

Dompierre brought a pile of donated fabric and his personal story to Career and Technical Education Day at ACIT, where he and other professionals shared their stories.

For some, the message was there are jobs for students with skills that don't require a college degree. It's a message often drowned out by the focus on going to college.

At a recent workshop on higher education, Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, questioned the value of proposals to make college free. He said promoting college for everyone does not address what skills people actually need to do a job, or the fact that there are good jobs that require training, but not a college degree.

Kristen Schaffer, supervisor of Career and Technical Education at ACIT, said while the school trains students for jobs, they must also teach them the "soft skills" of how to get and keep those jobs. Networking with professionals and internships help students make those connections.

Brandon Santos, 19, of Pleasantville, just graduated from ACIT in June and is working at Walker Automotive. He lives just down the street and first contacted the company over a spring break to spend a day job shadowing. He did a summer internship, got a good review, and had a job when he graduated.

“I got ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) certified while I was here,” he said of ACIT.

He advised students to not be afraid to ask questions and to have a good work ethic.

“I ask questions all the time,” he said. “And work hard. That’s what people want to see.”

Zachary Friedman, 27, of Egg Harbor Township, said he went to Universal Technical Institute after graduating from ACIT and realized he had already learned almost everything at ACIT that was taught at UTI.

“Just pay attention in school and keep a good attitude,” he said. “Getting the experience is the best way to learn.”

Automotive instructor Curt Silver said many juniors are intimidated about going out and knocking on doors to get jobs or internships.

“We’re bringing the businesses in to them to make it less intimidating,” he said.

For those going on to college, the ACIT program gave them a head start. Ashley Vassallo, 18, of Folsom, graduated in June and is now attending the Academy of Culinary Arts at Atlantic Cape Community College with a major in pastry and baking. She’s hoping for a career in food science, research and development.

“I came in so prepared and had a lot of credits that transferred,” she said. “I got the building blocks here and it was an easier transition. When I look back, I appreciate it even more.”

Kelly McPherson-Hoey, admissions director at ACIT, said they have an Advisory Board meeting April 6, when almost 100 employers and school staff will meet to share how to make sure graduates are ready to become employees.

“We want to be able to keep up with the industries so our students can graduate with the skills employers want,” she said.

Dompierre said students should be prepared for the unexpected, network with professionals and be open to new opportunities.

He recalled being told he would lose his job at Showboat , and being in shock “for about a week.” Then he went to a two-week program to learn how to make custom-made window treatments and never looked back.

“Pay attention and learn from everyone around you,” he said. “I started working out of my home and now I have a building and a partner and employees.”