



Gearing Up for the Next Generation

By Tina Grady
Senior Associate Editor

MANY PEOPLE IN THE YOUNGER GENERATION—the pre-professional stage of life—have daydreams of exactly what they want to be “when they grow up,” such as an astronaut, doctor, carpenter, writer or racecar driver. Some waver back and forth on their future career choice, changing their minds with the season and environment. And there are still others who have no idea.

However, when it comes to the youth of the collision repair industry, these future autobody techs not only know that they want to work in the collision repair industry, but what they want from the industry and what kind of future they think it holds for them.

Geoff Gault, who expects to graduate in December from Wallace State Community College’s autobody repair program in Hanceville, Ala., says he believes the industry is “wide open.” Several recent studies and data collected show that qualified techs are in demand, and this shortage is getting more difficult to fill. Gault’s assessment seems to be accurate—but

with a caveat. That stipulation is that it’s wide open if the aspiring autobody technician is educated properly in the repair business, and today’s young techs acknowledge this. They know that gone are the days of students expecting to make a collision repair career from fumbling around in a hobby shop-like body shop or making a living out of collision repair without

require the background of a hands-on process more than it does today, there are obviously going to be different training requirements.”

Because of this, McGee says his organization is looking at how to incorporate academic skills into the process of learning collision repair so the future techs understand not only how to repair a vehicle but why it’s repaired in a particular way. McGee says geometry and physics are part of collision repair. By incorporating these areas of study into the collision repair technology curriculums, it will help the future techs comprehend not only how to repair a vehicle but to know how math and science apply to the industry. “They’ll have an understanding of the background of it or know how to convert the same application to length, height and width on the dimension of the vehicle in repair methods,” McGee says. “The new vehicle systems will require this.”

Kim Beck, a collision repair instructor for A.P. Brewer High School in Somerville, Ala., and an I-CAR instructor, adds to this, saying that this means that future techs need to be more highly qualified as far as intellect is concerned. Vehicle repair isn’t for the unintelligent as some have stereotyped the profession in the past. Beck’s students have to learn more math and science, which keeps both him and his students on their toes. Students recognize this need, so they are asking for more in-depth and complex training.

“They’re asking us to be more computerized,” says Beck, who is also a committee member for I-CAR’s tech training PACE+ST³ initiative, or People Actively Creating Employability Thru Short-Term Tasking, a program aimed at providing students with collision repair training that will make future techs competent to perform entry-level tasks competently with minimal or no supervision. “They want a career, not just a hobby shop. They want to see the light at the end of the tunnel. They want to know about benefits, options, how much of a career they’ll be able to make out of it, etc. Kids are pretty mature now.”

Bob Henry, an autobody repair and refinishing instructor at the Technology Center of DuPage in Addison, Ill., has only taught collision repair for about three years but worked as a bodyman for more than 40 years. In this time, he says, “Things have changed a lot. I tell [the students] that.” Henry recalls how he bought a Chevy Impala for \$2,500 the day he graduated from high school. “But now,” he says, “the average car costs about \$25,000. You have to be a lot smarter than I was, and you have to further your education. It takes a smarter, higher grade of techs.”

Ultimately, Henry says, the more qualified a tech is the more money he or she will be able to make. Dustin Wood, a senior at Limestone County Career Center in Athens, Ala., recognizes this. “If you don’t know your

stuff, you’ll never make any money,” Woods says. “I like to know about everything, I will never know everything, but I will do my best to learn what I need to know. There is different stuff that comes out every day, so it’s challenging. But that’s what makes this [industry] fun.” And it’s what will make being an autobody repairer lucrative, he says.

Beyond burger flipping

Although the potential exists for techs to make good money in the collision repair industry, many parents have been hesitant to be supportive of their kids entering this field or work. The collision repair industry has notoriously had a bad reputation as a place to send troubled students who aren’t college bound or those who aren’t academically inclined. But the image of it being a shifty line of work has been changing, and some parents now are not only supportive of their kids becoming repairers, but they continually encourage them. Take Gault, for example. His mother, Glenda Gault, is a survival skills facilitator who works with at-risk teen-agers and young adults. She recognizes that Geoff isn’t only good at what he does (he made it to this year’s SkillsUSA-VICA Alabama statewide competition), but says, “I’m sure he’ll make a very good living at it. I tell my kids that not everyone is bound to go to college.” Geoff went to two years of college and “decided it wasn’t his cup of tea,” his mother says. “We all need to get some type of trade or skills and enhance our work ethic.” Otherwise, she says, these kids “will be flipping burgers all their lives. A lot of times parents want to force their kids into doing something they don’t want to do.” But if the techs-to-be aren’t satisfied with the career path that’s being decided for them, despite the parent or parents’ good intentions, those students



Future techs at the 2003 Alabama SkillsUSA-VICA state competition.

formal training, especially as modern vehicles grow increasingly complex.

Tom McGee, executive director of I-CAR, says because of the continual changes in vehicle systems and construction methods, ongoing training will be required, especially because jobs in the industry are evolving. Not only will there be a change in the type of tasks performed in jobs outside the technician level—such as those at the insurance level—but the jobs will require a different skills than a few years ago or even today. “In some cases, the position that may become available may



Photo by Greg Gambrel

Justin Prather, a senior at Walker Career Center in Indianapolis, hopes to receive guidance from a mentor.

won't succeed. "If they aren't happy [with what they are doing], they won't be successful," Glenda Gault says. "They can't do something just to make their parents happy."

The techs of tomorrow say this parental nod of approval is not only a relief, but it's a motivator for them. "My folks say, 'Whatever you decide to do, just be good at it,'" says Landon McDaniel, a first-year student at the Center for Technology in Colbert County, Ala. McDaniel says he plans to do just that—work hard and "make a good living at it." He's confident he will be able to, especially because he is specializing in painting, where there are many opportunities. "There are so many different ways, so many types of styles... and painters can make tons of money," McDaniel says.

A call to industry

John Savell, a junior at Dothan Technical Center in Dothan, Ala., also aspires to go into refinishing. "I'm pretty good at painting, and that's where most of the money is made." However, despite the unwavering confidence of these aspiring techs that they will be able to carve out a successful career in the collision repair industry, they also say that they won't be able to do it without the support of the industry—both now as students and when they start as entry-level techs. Savell, who also recently participated in the SkillsUSA-VICA Alabama state competition, along with

Gault and McDaniel, says the support of the competition by body shops, the nation's largest insurer and several industry companies, is the kind of backing that future techs need to successfully enter the industry as qualified repairers. "By meeting other folks an listening to them, you learn a lot," Savell says. "We've been trying to get the industry behind us... and now the industry has stepped up and given us a hand. If the industry keeps supporting us, the programs will go places."

Knowing what they want

If the programs continue to prosper, so will much-needed qualified techs. But that doesn't guarantee these newly trained repairers will stay in the collision repair industry. So you ask, what do they want from the industry? What are they looking for these days? Each individual has his or her own ideas, but they concur that they want to be employed full-time, with good benefits and do more than fetch coffee or push around a broom. National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation (NATEF)-certified programs and the PACE+ST³ initiative are intended to prepare future techs so they are qualified to do more than just menial gopher tasks, and many of the up and coming repairers are ready to dive right in and use their skills.

Take Joe Rosemeyer, for example. Rosemeyer, a 12th-grade autobody repair student at Walker Career Center in Indianapolis, says he's "just looking for an opportunity like everyone else in this field." He says doesn't expect to start out on top, but he wants to get paid a fair wage and wants to continue to learn on the job. Rosemeyer, like many of his classmates, says they are looking for a body shop job where the "A" techs are willing to mentor them so they can better learn the trade and be a valuable asset to their employers. Most say they decided on collision repair because of their love of cars, but they want more than that—they want to use this passion as the foundation for their career. "If someone would be willing to mentor me at my job, I would be willing to

listen to what they have to say to me and to show me," Rosemeyer says.

Justin Prather, also a senior at Walker Career Center and Rosemeyer's classmate, is on the same page. "I want the responsibilities of being trusted to work on cars in a shop," he says. "I don't want the shops to feel like I'm just a kid who doesn't know what he is doing... but I would want a mentor for a while—just for someone to look over my work." Their classmates, Marshall Thompson and Josh Cook, are also looking for jobs that will provide mentoring environments. "I would like someone to mentor me because it could help me to understand the way bodywork is expected to be done," Cook says.

It's this attitude, both the students and their instructors say, that is raising the bar of the industry. At the same time, it's raising the students' expectations for making a career out of the industry. Thompson, for example, says he sees future challenges in being a top-notch collision repairer, but he is also looking beyond that—as are many others. "One of the challenges I see in the future is raising a family successfully," Thompson says, which he says is one of the reasons he will be taking a look at what kind of benefits will be offered, the income potential and whether a mentor will be willing to work with him as he decides where he will work.

Eric Crafton, also a senior at Walker Career Center, says he wants to earn enough money in his job to "get through life." Crafton says he also would like his future employer to be supportive of ongoing training because it will be a challenge to stay up on the continual changes from the vehicle manufacturers. "[But] I enjoy challenges," he says. "I got into this industry for the sure fact of interest and demand. The demand for good techs is way up, and since I enjoy doing it, I chose to see how good I am at it."

A new breed of technicians

Although the upcoming techs of our industry each have their own goals and thoughts on their futures, there is one theme that's evident among them: They have a passion for cars and repairing them, and they are serious about building a successful and respectable career in the collision repair industry. To them, it's more than a hobby—it's their future and how they plan to support themselves and possibly their families. That's why, says Tony Molla, vice president of communications for the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), in order to keep employees challenged and to provide the type of career path that is going to



Photo by Tina Grady

A student competitor tests his mettle against some metal during the 2003 Alabama SkillsUSA-VICA state competition.

make the employees want to stay with the company or body shop, the body shop need to make training and certification part of their overall benefits package. "We're becoming a much more tech-driven industry," he says.

Although, health benefits and pay are important—"the emphasis on wages has to be upward," Molla says—shops need to look even beyond this to meet the demands of the next generation of techs. "There is a new breed of technicians. The role the shops themselves play in employee development has to expand beyond simple health benefits and into other areas to enhance, attract and keep the best and the brightest." ■

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1-888-722-3787 ext. 283
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