

Former ironworker finds a higher calling

By Jack Naudi

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Duane McGowan
(P-D)

Duane McGowan has no fear of heights. That's an important trait for an ironworker, his trade for 12 years.

But it doesn't do him much good in his latest profession. It's a job that couldn't be more different from the one in which he balanced on narrow beams hundreds of feet above the ground.

Nowadays, the 35-year-old has his feet planted firmly on the ground while instructing freshmen at the Construction Careers Center in St. Louis. The charter school, sponsored by the Associated General Contractors of St. Louis, teaches high school students the basics in a variety of trades.

Teaching children is a profession that McGowan, a St. Louis native, never imagined while growing up.

"When I was younger, I didn't like school that much," he said.

He liked working with his hands, and he was giddy about heights.

"My parents told me (that) when I was little, I would see a person working up on a telephone pole or working up high and I would point out and say I want to work up high," he said.

He landed in trade school after high school and shortly became an apprentice for the Ironworkers Local 396 union. Overall, construction is a dangerous industry, but ironworking is perhaps the most harrowing.

For more than a decade, McGowan enjoyed pushing steel into place. But a chronic back problem was

one of the reasons he left the trade. His enthusiasm for the work was damped by the pain from lifting and twisting beams.

McGowan walked away from construction in 1998 and went back to school, where he trained to become a telecommunications technician. The next year, he went to work locally for WorldCom Inc., now known as MCI. When that company hit the skids and dramatically cut staff in 2001, he was out of work. But not for long.

A friend of McGowan's who taught in a trade school asked him to help. Intrigued with the idea, McGowan discovered a new charter school. It was the summer of 2001, and the Construction Careers Center was about to become the first school of its kind to open in the country.

His job is nothing if not eclectic. Freshmen at the school get their first taste of the construction trades from McGowan. He's responsible for giving them short bursts of hands-on training in areas that include plumbing, electrical work and carpentry.

For him, teaching has been fulfilling.

"It's the most rewarding job that I've had," he said. "You're not just a teacher. You become a counselor. You even become a friend and mentor to some of these students."

McGowan takes a personal approach to the job. He gets to know his students and their families as well as the highlights and lowlights of their lives.

"It's more than teaching a student how to hang drywall," he said. "It's working with their parents. It's talking to them about their little brother."

He's also part cheerleader for his students. If he sees one who appears downhearted or quiet, he's quick to act.

"I might come over and put my hand on their shoulder and say: 'What's wrong? You're usually so cheerful.' ... I will try to do anything I can to get them to open up."

A normal day for most teachers might begin at 8 a.m. and end at 3:30 p.m. But he makes himself

available at any time for students and parents. He has little use for formal parent-teacher conferences, mainly because he's constantly in touch with the families.

"I feel like that's a big part of my job here," he said. "The kids have so many problems going on that part of my job, a bigger part than usual, goes to contacting parents. I schedule conferences all the time."

To be sure, McGowan gets frustrated from time to time, but he tries never to let it show. Many of his students come from troubled backgrounds, so the last thing they need, he figures, is a teacher who adds to their burden.

"When I'm feeling a little discouraged and things aren't going as smoothly as I would like to do, I do what I can to keep my energy going. When students see that kind of optimism, they want to emulate it."

Duane McGowan

Education: North Technical High School, with emphasis in building-service mechanics

Job: Started teaching at Construction Careers Center when it opened in 2001

"When you get ready to give a presentation in front of a business group or a business meeting, there's a lot of psychological preparation that needs to be done. I do the same thing for my class."

Construction Careers Center

Students: Ninth through 11th grade, expanding to 12th in 2004-05

Address: 1224 Grattan Street, St. Louis

Principal: Lanette Meyer

Enrollment: 252

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