

Foundry molds futures

Benton business invests in educating its employees



A **FOUNDRY WORKER** pours liquid metal into a mold recently at the Benton Foundry.

By **JULYE WEMPLE**
Press Enterprise Writer

BENTON — The list of customers who buy iron castings from the Benton Foundry is long and prestigious.

It includes NASA, John Deere, Troy-Bilt and Disney, just to name a few.

With billion-dollar clients across the country, foundry president Jeff Hall says investing in employees makes sense for the business.

That's why the company has created a scholarship program that pays employees to earn a two-year, tuition-free technical degree.

"It's good for them and it's good for us," foundry vice president Tim Brown said. "We get a highly-educated employee and they get a college education without bills."

'Using your head'

Gone are the days when melting iron, forming molds, and casting iron was all done by hand, Brown said.

"When people think of the foundry industry, they think of work that requires backbreaking labor," Brown said. "But it's engineering. It's using your head."

Company continues to expand, hire

Around since the Civil War, the Benton Foundry has gone from a one-man operation to a 240-person, 225,000-square-foot company.

It's one of just 1,950 foundries left in the country — down from 7,500 a few decades ago, according to company vice president Tim Brown.

When he started around 1975, the foundry had 22 customers in five states and produced 18 tons of iron per day, Brown said. Now, the foundry has 250 customers in 22 states and produces 175 tons of iron per day.



CAROLINE MENGINE looks over a spec plan for an item at the Benton Foundry with foundry **President Jeff Hall**. Mengine graduated from Pennsylvania College of Technology while working at the foundry in 2015.

Foundry

But there's a shortage of trained workers, Hall said.

"You just don't have this skill set walking in the door," he said.

So the company began socking money away in a scholarship fund, he said. There's \$150,000 in the account now, which earns about \$7,500 each year in interest. The goal is to get the fund up to \$500,000 and use the interest generated to self-fund the program.

As it is now, the company makes up the difference for two tuition bills each year, which amounts to approximately \$50,000.

Employees who have worked for the foundry for at least two years can apply for the program. After that, they go through a series of interviews and tests to see if they're a good fit.

"We want to see what their interests are, if they coincide with our needs," Hall explained. "We also have to make sure they're qualified — did they graduate high school? Can they get into college?"

The pair of employees the company selects can then enroll in associate's degree programs at Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport or at Penn State-Hazleton.

A tuition-free degree isn't the only perk of the program. Knowing it's tough to juggle a full-time job and go to school full-time, participant's hours are cut to just 20 per week. They're still paid for a 40-hour work week, though.

In addition, the company also pays for all their expenses, like books and course materials, and reimburses them for mileage.

"We look at this as an investment," Hall said. "You just don't get this skill set walking in the door."

'So many jobs here'

For 29-year-old Caroline Mengine, the program has been life-changing. After graduating high school in 2006, Mengine went to college to get her teaching degree.

She hated it, though, and dropped out after her first semester. She worked at a gas



Press Enterprise/Keith Haupt

SPARKS FLY from a 10-metric-ton furnace as the molten metal is poured into smaller pots that will distribute the metal into each of the castings at the Benton Foundry recently.

station before applying at the foundry.

"I started here because I needed a job," she said. But she soon realized the work suited her.

"They never really talked about manufacturing, they never really talked about engineering in my high school as being options," Mengine said. "It was, 'Oh, you're going to college. You're going to sit in an office somewhere, or you're going to be a teacher.' All really boring stuff."

The married mother of two was chosen for the college program and graduated in 2015 with a degree in automated manufacturing. Now she runs one of the company's labs and loves her job, she said.

"That's something I wish people knew, is that manufacturing is so interesting and there are so many jobs here," Mengine said.

'Huge opportunity'

Amanda Hartman and Teo Grigas are the program's most recent graduates.

Grigas, 43, started working at the foundry straight out of high school after a knee injury his junior year blew any chance of a football scholarship.

Since then, he's done just about every job in the foundry, he said. But even with 20 years of experience and a broad set of skills, Grigas said he never considered applying for the college program.

"But then my wife found out about it," he said with a laugh.

With her encouragement, he applied and was chosen.

Hartman, a 31-year-old single mother, says the program was "a huge opportunity."

Her career started much like Mengine's — she needed a job with health benefits. And like Mengine, she soon

realized she had an affinity for the work.

But college would have been impossible on her own. Even if she could have afforded the tuition, she couldn't have cut her hours and still paid her bills, she said.

Still, there are limits to the company's generosity, Grigas joked. They wouldn't approve a study abroad program or fund a spring break vacation.

"Spring break was right here," Brown said.

The last three graduates — Mengine, Hartman, and Grigas, all won the school's faculty awards, and Hartman and Mengine both graduated with 4.0 GPAs, Brown said.

In total, 20 employees have earned college degrees through the foundry's tuition program.

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Expand

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In the last 20 years, the company has expanded the foundry four times: in 1996, 2001, 2009 and 2015.

They've squeezed every last square foot of space out of the original lot, Brown joked.

Its latest expansion, a 12,000-square-foot building, houses the maintenance department. What's significant about the addition is what it says about the company's technological growth, Brown pointed out.

"We have engineers who are designing and building our own equipment and writing our own software," he said. "It's all done in-house."

Since the company makes its own equipment, it needs a team of maintenance workers to service it, he said.

Business is so good, the foundry is looking to hire more workers, Brown said. And once they're hired, the company works to keep them.

"In the 40 years I've worked here, we've only laid off employees once," Brown said. "We actually had to ask around how to do it."

Long-term employees create a "stable work community," which helps makes the foundry so successful, Brown said.

By Julye Wemple



SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS Amanda Hartman, center, and Grigas recently graduated from Pennsylvania College of Technology with the assistance of a scholarship from the Benton Foundry. With the pair is **Jeff Hall**, foundry president. **Another photo, page 10.**
PHOTOS BY KEITH HAUPT