

Solid Foundation

WECDSD launches new masonry program at F.J. Brennan



Teacher Marko Senjanin leans on a mortar mixer in the new masonry sciences shop at F.J. Brennan Catholic High School.

(Windsor, Ontario, Friday June 19, 2015) – Marko Senjanin didn't need to look any further than the construction site across the street from his house to realize he made the right decision to get involved with teaching a brand new masonry program at F.J. Brennan Catholic High School.

“There was this guy doing the brick work, and he told me he was 75 years old,” said Senjanin. “He said he was going to work for another five years and when I asked who was going to replace him, he shrugged his shoulders and said ‘Nobody. Nobody wants to come in to this trade.’”

The ground work for addressing that problem will begin in September when the first cohort of students enter the masonry sciences program at Brennan, a brand new course offering developed in cooperation with the Canada Masonry Centre, and the first of its kind anywhere in this country. So far, about 55 Grade 9, 10, and 11 students have registered for the program.

“I’m hearing there’s a shortage of skilled masons in this area,” said Senjanin, “which is a real shame, because a master mason can make close to \$60 an hour.”

Tony Masciotra, president of the Ontario Masonry Contractors’ Association and the local firm Con-Tact Masonry Ltd., knows all too well about the difficulty in finding skilled masons in this area.

“You can’t find bricklayers right now,” he said. “This new program will help fill a great void.”



The reality of a skills gap in the trade is nothing new to John Blair, Executive Director of the Ontario Masonry Contractors’ Association, as well as the Ontario Masonry Contractors Association.

“You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to recognize the attrition levels that are going to occur over the next several decades,” said Blair, citing a former Human

Resources Development Canada report which indicated that younger people were not going into the trade. “But that also creates a great opportunity for those students who want to learn a skill that blends a lot of theory with practical, hands-on experience.”

Offering such a program is just one part of the WECDSB’s vision to do something concrete and meaningful about better training students to fill the increasing number of skilled trades jobs that are being left vacant in this region, according to Director of Education Paul Picard.

“As a board, we have an obligation to educate students and direct them into the pathways that match their individual aspirations,” said Picard. “But we also have a civic duty, to do what we can to support the local economy, and an important part of that is in trying to direct students towards professions that are in need of young talent here.”

Senjanin, who recently completed Level One of the masonry apprenticeship after taking an eight week training course at the Ontario Masonry Training Centre in Mississauga, said besides learning the basics of laying bricks and mortar – which he quickly discovered is far more complicated than he ever imagined – students will learn about various technologies, health and safety issues, and the variety of roles on construction job sites.

“This gives them a great head start,” said Senjanin, a qualified mold maker with an advanced diploma in engineering from St. Clair College and a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering Technology from Wayne State University.

An essential component of the program's success will rely on convincing young students of the benefits of going into the masonry trade, Blair said.

"It's not just about being a bricklayer or a stone mason," he said. "Graduates from this program can go into an apprenticeship, but can also go on to construction technology programs at community college or into engineering programs at university, and they'll have a great head start because they'll already understand the nomenclature of the trade. From there, they can go in to project management or a whole host of other professions. Their value to potential employers is going to be very high."

Blair went on to add that there are a lot of lingering misconceptions about the trade.

"There's a perception that it's a dirty trade, or that the people who do these jobs couldn't make it in other areas," he said. "The reality is exactly the opposite. This is a highly skilled trade which requires tremendous math skills, hand-eye coordination and real attention to detail. This is a craft that's been around for thousands of years, and some of the most famous buildings in the world are masonry structures that were created by the artisans of this trade. So this program will expose students to very sophisticated applications, and provide them with some very tangible, life-skill sets."



John Blair