

19-year-old apprentice 'well on his way' at Wayne Griffin Electric

The giant light poles lie all around the Floyd College parking lot, under construction in Cartersville, GA. They are waiting for someone to stand them up and do the electrical wiring.



Light poles 30 feet tall await installation by electricians from Wayne J. Griffin Electric Inc. at Floyd College near Cartersville.

A shiny red pickup truck roars up to the curb. A 6' 3" giant of a man gets out. Yep. This is our guy. The light poles are going up. Bill Kowalik is on the job.

Kowalik is only 19 years old. One year out of McEachern High School in Cobb County, he's already a fourth of the way to becoming a licensed electrician. "My company, Wayne J. Griffin Electric, has its own apprenticeship program. After four years of school and OJT, I'll have my electrician's license," said the soft-spoken Kowalik. "I'm already earning good starting pay. But when I get that license, I'll really be on my way."

He doesn't have to wait three more years to make more money, though. "Every year we get an evaluation and a raise based on how well we did. Also, if I get an A in the apprenticeship program, I get a 4% raise; if I get a B, it's 3%, and so on," Kowalik explained. "That's a real good reason to study hard. Plus, the things I'm studying are things I can immediately apply on the job."

Kowalik has an advantage over the average student. "We use the NCCER *CONTREN* curriculum that I used in high school, so a lot of this year has been like a review, except there is a lot more added," Kowalik said. "For example, our field trip was to Eaton Electric where they make electrical service panels from scratch, and electronic control panels as well. After that trip, we had to go on the Internet and find articles about how the Eaton control panels are used and in what kinds of applications."

A career start like Kowalik's is not unusual in the construction industry today. He took construction courses in high school and has managed to put that education to use already.

"Bill is impressive," said his foreman, George Booker. "I went through two other guys on this job before Bill came on. Those other guys didn't understand the concepts; they couldn't see how things go together. Bill's high school training gave him the big picture and a lot more. He has all the basic skills plus he knows how to work. Man, that's a blessing!"



Bill Kowalik, seated on a trenching machine he has learned to operate as a part of his OJT with Wayne J. Griffin Electric, talks about the day's work with outside foreman George Booker. Floyd College, background, is under construction near Cartersville, GA. Kowalik has amazed everyone on the job site because of the number of things he has learned. "He can learn anything," Booker said of Kowalik.

In addition to the electrical training, Kowalik is getting to do some of what he thinks is "cool stuff." Booker has already taught Kowalik to operate a front-end loader, a forklift and a trencher. "He can learn anything, and he learns to do things right," Booker said with a smile.

The general foreman, Mr. William Turner, came by and handed out paychecks. Kowalik thanked him. Turner looked Bill Kowalik in the eye for a few seconds, nodded his head and said, "You're welcome. You sure earned it." That had to feel good.



Project foreman William Turner, center, listens in as outside foreman George Booker, left, and apprentice electrician Bill Kowalik discuss the wiring plan for the light poles in the parking lot of a college. Kowalik has been on the job for just under a year. He is happy with his decision to go into the electrical apprenticeship program. Some people go to college. Bill Kowalik is building a college and a great future at the same time.

Kowalik's construction instructor at McEachern High, Mr. Kevin Ward, is not one bit surprised that Kowalik is doing so well. Ward sent Kowalik to apply at Wayne J. Griffin Electric. "Bill has a great work ethic and he's smart. He's boo- smart and worldly-wise. He knows how to get along with people," Ward recalled with a smile. "Bill could have done anything he wanted to do: college, start his own business, anything. He's got a great future however he chooses to use what he's learning. I'm glad he chose the apprenticeship program, though, because he loves what he's doing."

Kowalik's mother, Carol Markowski, echoes that sentiment. "I wasn't sure what he wanted to do after high school," Markowski said. "I took a wait-and-see attitude about William (she prefers the formal name to Bill) being an electrician. But he just loves it. Every day he has these great stories about what he learned or did on the job. At one worksite, they were just amazed that a one-year apprentice could do what William can do. He showed some more experienced craftsmen how to correctly bend conduit. I'm really proud of him and happy for him."

"What's not to love about this? This is a great place to work. The people in the trades are super. Everybody on the site works together. If I need a two inch drill bit and don't have one, I can go borrow one from a plumber, or someone. The work is hands-on, everyday is a new challenge. And if I get dirty, nobody cares," Kowalik said smiling. "Yeah, there are some laborers sometimes that are a pain, but they're people who've dropped out. They don't stay long. The trades people are here for a career. They're good people."

What's a workday like for Kowalik? It starts at 7:00 and ends at 3:30. He goes to apprenticeship school one day a week for five hours. But when he's off, he's off. "I go home and get on the computer to check e-mail and surf the net some. I like to go bowling one night a week and my girlfriend and I play poker on Thursdays."

Yikes! Gamble away that paycheck? "No, it's not like that. I go to Buffalo's Restaurant. It doesn't cost anything to play, but you can win free stuff. I was the 'big winner' last night," he laughed, pulling a ticket for a free appetizer from his billfold.

Where is Bill Kowalik's journey going to take him from here? "I am happy to be learning and earning at the same time. I know that if I drive by Floyd College some night, these light poles will be making the parking lot safe for the students and faculty. I'll know that I've done something that will last. Everything we do at Griffin is that way – done right and done to last. One day, I'd like to know enough to be able to run a whole job for my company. And someday, when I know enough about how things work, maybe I'll start Kowalik Electric." That has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?

Big dreams for a large man who is putting up giant light poles. But like those light poles that will light up a college parking lot, Bill Kowalik's plans and dreams are lighting the way to a bright future indeed.