

2008 Expo, SkillsUSA Championships Draw Record Participation

211 Companies; More than 4,000 Attend Annual Event

Daniel Bohmer was thankful. Calvin Pate was appreciative, too. And Billy Register could've sat on the grass bank and watched heavy equipment move dirt around for another hour if he didn't have to get back to his school bus.

They were all attendees at the 2008 CEFGA CareerExpo and SkillsUSA Championships at the Gwinnett County Fairgrounds in Lawrenceville. The fourth annual event attracted record participation in terms of schools attending, companies participating and total attendees. Over two days, April 24 and 25, there were 107 schools, 211 construction-related companies and 4,193 total attendees.

The event is sponsored and managed by CEFGA, a nonprofit organization supported by leading construction companies. CEFGA's mission is to address the industry's skilled worker shortage by connecting the construction industry and the education system in Georgia.

"It was a great hit with my students," said Daniel Bohmer, a construction teacher at North Hall High School. "The hands on activities were especially appealing. My students cheered for me three times on the bus trip home because of my willingness to prepare to take the field trip. Many of them sought reassurance that I would plan on attending the expo next year. This generated a lot of excitement toward my course and certainly will help to sustain my course enrollment."

While the Expo is designed primarily for the benefit of students – mostly high school juniors and seniors – it was a big hit with participating companies, too.

"I feel like we really connected with the students," said Calvin Pate, vice president of Harrison Contracting Co. (a painting company based in Atlanta). "Part of our exhibit included questions about the construction industry that the kids had to answer to win prizes. I had a lot of the students coming back and asking more questions. I was impressed with a lot of the students."

One young man, in particular, impressed another participating company – C.A. Murren & Sons. Billy Register from Toombs County High School was sitting on a grass bank on Friday afternoon, even as the event was shutting down. He was watching professionals operate large front-end loaders and excavators, as they cleaned the site where students were operating the equipment earlier in the day.

"I could watch that equipment all day," said Register, a junior in Scott Tuck's construction program in Toombs County.

Harold Rivers, a 25 year-old student at Dekalb Technical College attended the expo as a volunteer. He was there to encourage other students to take what they want to do seriously. "College isn't for everyone," he said, "There are many opportunities in construction that don't require your [traditional] four-year schooling." Harold knows this first-hand. He started his studies as a biology major, moved on to psychology, and then found himself in the construction industry. He decided to go back to school to pursue electrical line work, and knows that participating in the program will help continue to open doors for him. And Harold wants others to know that they can do the same for themselves.

Cristian Reyes, a 16 year-old West Hall High student, was joined by his friends as they cheered on a fellow peer who was trying to maneuver a remote control vibratory tamper. Cristian wants to get into the construction field once he's out of high school. He was at the expo to see what options might be in store for him.

Since the 9th grade, 17 year-old Ashley Cooksey from Frederick Douglas High School, has "wanted to build houses." In her hand was a business card from Wayne J. Griffin Electric, one of the exhibitors at the expo. She says she'll give them a call her senior year.

Manning one of the exhibit booths was Brian Robinson. He represented the Georgia Department of Transportation. The DOT sponsored The World of Highway Construction and Maintenance and was there to "encourage kids to get in the construction industry," and to know "what we have available."

17-year-old Francine Koenig from Harris County High School, was joined by the members of her school's SkillsUSA team. Francine was excited to be at the expo. She "wants to be a mechanical engineer," and said it's "important to come out and see other professions." She thinks it's important to "experience things before you go to college."

Quintez Orr, a 17 year-old Junior at South Atlanta High School, sat at the wheel in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler. The grin on his face made it clear he was enjoying the non-moving ride. He was there because he "has hopes of [getting into] engineering and auto mechanics."

Brooke Akers, a Yancey Bros. Representative, "came out to recruit for the company's diesel tech program." She said that the company continues to participate because there is a "good turn out." Each year they recruit 4-5 new students for work and internships.

A friendly-faced Eric Mack sat talking to students. His jaw hurt from moving so much, but it didn't phase him. He works for Georgia Transmission who co-sponsored The World of Energy and Industrial Construction to encourage students to "be somebody." They "want the kids to see there's a variety of ways to do electronics and communications." He doesn't want people to view the industry as "just being a job," or to only think about money.

And this year seemed to be promising. Eric said that he "enjoys the kids." They are "smart and have exceptional personalities." While they seem to have a "good head on their shoulders," he knows that they may not be sure of what they're going to do. He was there "to help open their eyes and see what they like." He encourages them to "pursue tech school, college, a 4 year degree, whatever it takes to do what they want to do."

Outside there was some heavy duty work taking place.

Codey Papels, a 17 year-old Junior from Lakeview High School joined his classmates on the three-hour trip to the Expo. Time was short, but he made sure to have his hand at the mini-excavator. With determination, he attempted to put a soft ball in a bucket, opting for the more challenging smaller one rather than the larger. He'd been "wanting to come out [to the expo] for a while." He's currently in the construction and metals program at Lakeview High School, and "is thinking about welding" as a profession. For now he was just happy to be at the Expo.

In addition to The World of Utility Contracting (home of the heavy equipment), other popular exhibits included:

- The World of Safety, where students were oriented on OSHA, Georgia Tech and other industry volunteers on how to properly wear a hard hat and safety glasses, which were issued free of charge to all attendees.
- The World of Masonry and Concrete, where students learned about different wall systems and materials and had an opportunity to lay brick to a line.
- The World of Fire Protection, where students observed the activation of real sprinkler systems.
- The World of Plumbing and Mechanical, where students got to use a camera to peak into a configuration of PVC pipe.
- The World of Energy and Industrial Construction, where students observed pole-climbing demonstrations and other activities sponsored by Georgia Power, Georgia Transmission and AGL Resources.

- The World of Highway Construction and Maintenance, where students learned about career opportunities with the Georgia Department of Transportation and other highway construction-related companies.
- The World of Construction Management, where students learned about the latest in Building Information Modeling (BIM), Sustainability and Green Building.
- The World of Architecture and Engineering, where students observed simulated earthquake and the affect that it could have on a building.

The two-day event also included a visit by Miss Georgia and Georgia Lt. Governor Casey Cagle, who served as honorary chair.

Always a highlight of the event, the SkillsUSA Georgia Championships took place on Friday, April 25. One-hundred and seventy-one (171) of the top construction and engineering, drawing and design students in the state competed head-to-head in 16 different contests. The contests included carpentry, masonry, plumbing, sheet metal, electrical, welding, heating and air, architectural drafting and TeamWorks. Gold medal winners from the state championships move on to the SkillsUSA National Championships in Kansas City, June 23-27.

For more information about the Expo, SkillsUSA or CEFGA, please call 678-889-4445 or visit www.cefga.org