

Shaun Fitzgerald on Fast Track for Career in Masonry

Shaun Fitzgerald drives race cars. Almost every weekend you'll find him at the Senoia, Lanier, or Atlanta Motor Speedway. He drove his first race in a Quarter Midget at age 4½. These days he has two race cars, a 1934 Ford coupe and a 1937 Ford sedan, both of which he races in the Pro Division – Legends Category. Not bad for an 18-year-old, but being a race car driver is not Fitzgerald's only ambition.

On this day, he is loading his chalk block in preparation for his masonry class which is about to begin at the Masonry Association of Georgia's Apprenticeship Program in Avondale, Ga.

Race cars and masonry? What's the story here?

"When I was a senior at McEachern High School," recalled Fitzgerald, "Jamie Buck, the Apprenticeship Coordinator here at the Masonry Association School, came in one day to talk to us about careers in the masonry field. It sounded pretty good to me, and it's turned out even better than I expected."



Shaun Fitzgerald prepares his tools for class in the Apprenticeship Program of the Masonry Association of Georgia. He attends class one night per week. "I get to practice the things I see being done on the job," Fitzgerald says. "This training is real world and immediately useful on my jobsite." Fitzgerald is employed by Cornerstone Masonry and is helping build the new airport runway and renovate the concourse.

Fitzgerald got a job with Cornerstone Masonry. He works at the Atlanta airport on the new runway and concourse renovation projects. "I started out as a laborer, like everybody else, but every chance I get, I get 'on the wall' and lay some block," said Fitzgerald. "My foreman lets me do it because he knows I'm in the masonry apprenticeship program. He stays with me and makes sure I'm doing things the right way. Most of the time I do whatever needs to be done, but I'm learning a lot every day." The term "on the wall" means actually getting up on a scaffold with the masons and laying concrete block that will be there for at least a couple of hundred years. "Yeah, that's pretty neat knowing you're doing something that is going to last a lot longer than you'll even live," Fitzgerald said with a satisfied smile.



Shaun Fitzgerald (right) checks the spacing of concrete blocks along with Masonry Apprenticeship Instructor Edgar Peralta (left). “I’m not just learning masonry here,” Fitzgerald said. “We’re also taught the importance of teamwork and getting along with our supervisors and co-workers.” The Masonry Association of Georgia operates a masonry apprenticeship program in Avondale Estates, GA.

Wait a minute here. We’ve got a laborer who’s just starting in a masonry training program, and who’s doing production work on something as important as the new runway? How can that be? “Because of this card right here,” says Fitzgerald, proudly pulling a card out of his wallet. “This card shows that I completed Masonry Levels 1 through 3 in my high school construction class at McEachern. We used the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) curriculum. Our instructor, Mr. Ward, submits the training information to a national database, so wherever I go, I can show an employer what training I’ve completed. It makes quite a calling card.”

Kevin Ward, the construction teacher at McEachern High School in Powder Springs, Georgia, has been certified to teach the NCCER curriculum by the Construction Education Foundation of Georgia (CEFGA), a sponsoring agency of the NCCER. “You have to attend an intensive two-day workshop and pass a practical exam,” Ward explained. “Then you have to stay current with CEFGA and the NCCER by submitting training module completions to the NCCER database. It is a pretty rigorous process, but it is important to do this for our students because that’s how an employer knows the training has been done correctly. In Shaun’s case, I really didn’t have to do much training, per se. I taught Shaun how to learn and let him go at it. He can teach himself anything. He’s smart, honest and hard working. Plus, and this is a big plus, Shaun has a flair for leadership.”

“I learned all the basic construction skills in Mr. Ward’s classes, but I got to specialize in masonry,” Fitzgerald said. “One of the most important things I learned is how to work safely on the job. Everyone has to be aware of safety and work responsibly if everyone is going to be safe on the job.”

In addition to the basics and safety, Fitzgerald also learned about good work ethics. Kevin Ward notes, “We work directly with industry to make sure we’re teaching the skills employers are looking for. We have a council of industry leaders who act as an advisory board to the construction program. Industry people come into the classroom and talk to the students about the real world of construction. Every single speaker tells us about the importance of a strong work ethic. That makes an impression.”

Shaun Fitzgerald didn't just take the education and run, either. He goes back to McEachern frequently to tell the construction students about how it is in the real world. He also works with the masonry students to demonstrate all the new tips and techniques he is learning in the apprenticeship program and on the job.



Masonry Apprenticeship Instructor Edgar Peralta (left) shows Shaun Fitzgerald how to test a corner lead for precise plumb. “We train champions here in the program,” Peralta said proudly. “Our students have won many masonry competitions. Shaun is a fast learner and he brought a lot of skills with him from his high school training. I expect Shaun to be a first place winner, and really soon.”

Asked where he wants to go with his masonry career, Fitzgerald said, “I want to move up through the ranks. I can see myself in the foreman position within a few years. I’m not saying it will be easy, but I know what I have to learn. In the apprenticeship program, I’m polishing the skills I have and learning new ones. But to become the foreman, I’ll have to learn estimating, labor management, planning, how to work closely with the general contractors and more. Cornerstone Masonry is a good place to learn all those skills. The people are friendly and want to help you succeed.”

Mark Bryson, co-owner of Cornerstone Masonry, is glad Fitzgerald came on board. “He’s a good kid. He’s good natured. He works hard. He shows up and he doesn’t play around. He’s just an all ‘round good guy,” Bryson said. “We’d like to get him laying block full time, and one day we’d like to see him running a job.”

But there are other ambitions. “I live near a neighborhood where the homes have a lot of stonework in the European style architecture,” Fitzgerald said. “Not just stones slapped up for curb appeal, but real works of art. I drive through there often and look at the artistry of the design and workmanship. I am going to learn to be a stone mason, too. I want to do work like that. It’s beautiful, and it will last.”

Is anyone surprised that this race car driving mason has an artistic flair? “Not in the least,” said high school instructor Kevin Ward, chuckling. “Shaun decided he wanted to construct an archway as a project in the Level 3 NCCER training. No one had done anything like that before. Shaun figured out how to make the form for the concrete arch, poured concrete into the form, and set brick on it. It was a work of art itself!”

Shaun’s mom, Dana Fitzgerald, is pleased that Shaun is learning masonry skills. “It is important that he likes what he does for his career,” said Mrs. Fitzgerald. “And he really likes it! I made a special trip to his high school to see the arch he made. It was just

beautiful. I was so proud! In addition, he has built a paved walkway at his grandfather's house and put in a retaining wall. His grandfather is thrilled.”

Whether Shaun Fitzgerald becomes known as a race car driving artistic stone mason or a stone mason artist race car driver doesn't really matter. What matters is that this young man knows where he's going. And, he knows what he needs to know to get there.

CEFGA – the Construction Education Foundation of Georgia – is a nonprofit organization supported by leading construction companies and trade associations, working to promote careers in the construction industry. This success story was written by CEFGA staff member John Beavin. For more information contact John Beavin at 678-889-4445, ext. 304, or visit www.cefga.org