

2009 CEFGA Expo and SkillsUSA Championships Draw Record Crowd

243 Companies; More than 6,000 Attend Annual Event

By Irene Wazgowska, CEFGA Feature Writer

Students, educators, and industry professionals made their way around the Georgia International Convention Center and six acres of equipment and exhibits. They wore hard-hats with the CEFGA Expo 2009 logo, and safety glasses to ensure their protection. One might have thought some serious construction work was taking place, but those participating were just enjoying another successful year of the CEFGA Expo and SkillsUSA State Championships.

The Expo, which had previously been at the Gwinnett County Fairgrounds, made a first-year splash at the Georgia International Convention Center, April 16-17, 2009. The new and roomier home saw 4,510 students pass through its doors, along with 770 education representatives, and 865 industry professionals over the course of two days.

A grand total of 6,145 people attended this year's Expo and SkillsUSA State Championships. That represented a 46% increase in attendance over last year.

School busses full of students came from as far as Camden County High School near the Florida border in the south and as far Chattanooga TN in the north. All totaled, 191 schools participated in this year's event.

Dennis Carter, 15, a Forrest Park High School ninth grader was one of those in attendance. Taped around his wrist was a blue band signifying he was at the high school or tech school level (those in middle school wore green bands). He'd chosen to attend the Expo because he's interested in learning about construction.

Keeping the kids hydrated with free bottles of water, Charles Gray of Up Scaffolding was promoting safety for jobsites and teaching students the importance of steel-toed boots, hard hats and safety glasses.

14-year-old Diana Velasco from Lithia Springs High School took every opportunity to participate in the hands-on activities. She moved around the exhibit hall, taking pictures and reveling in the excitement.

Fun was key this year, but so was a full-on learning experience.

Gwendolyn Chandler represented Thomas Concrete, stamping the students passports while promoting the construction industry. She wants students to know that its "solid and honest work." Like many industry professionals at the event, she worries about what the future holds for the industry's workforce when the Baby Boomers retire. "We need young people in this industry," she said.

Waiting to take the scaffolding challenge in the World of Concrete, 16-year-old Daisy Wright from Gilmer County High School said that she had come because she is interested in architectural engineering or one day becoming a mechanical engineer. Plus, it was an opportunity to "have a lot of fun."

From Turner Job Corp, 18-year-old Martha Pittman thought attending the EXPO might give her a

better sense about her future. Her trade is facility maintenance, but she's continuing to look at other options especially because she enjoys painting and welding.

In his third year participating in the Expo, Robert Rock said it's always a good turn out. He works for Affordable Fire Protection, sponsor of the World of Fire Protection. Rock said he was there to teach kids about fire and life safety. Rock said the response was good and he was happy to have debunked some rumors about fire sprinklers. He was happy with the questions that were asked and encouraged them to keep coming.

Brenda Morris, a recruiter from Georgia Tech's School of Architecture, stood at the school's booth in the World of Architecture and Engineering showing virtual tours to expose the students to the technology side of construction. Along with showing the architectural aspect, she wanted to show that there are a lot of neat things you can get into in the construction field.

Goodman's Patrick Lewis said the students were having a blast and enjoying painting. His company set-up panels in the World of Painting and Interiors where students had their hand at painting over stenciled trees. He liked seeing the students involved, particularly those that might not be sure what they want to do in the future. He was there to help them find their skill, or something that they might enjoy. Last year his company took on 13 summer interns, and this year they were hoping to recruit more.

18-year-old Keana Ragesdale, a senior at Booker T. Washington High School had her hand at painting. She's planning on going to SCAD for animation and sequential art and couldn't have been more happy with her experience at the Expo. She thought it was exciting and enjoyed the hands-on aspect of things. She said it was "amazing."

Not every student in attendance was there to explore. Some worked on the opposite end of things.

T.J. Shelnutt, a 16-year-old from George Walton Academy was at the Expo helping his mom, Gina Shelnutt in the World of Utility Contracting and Heavy Equipment. He works for the Robert M. Anderson, along with his mom, during the summer and wanted to help out because he thought it was important for their presence. He wants kids to know what opportunities there are for them once they graduate from high school.

Jonathan Byrd, a Master Plumber with Ivey Mechanical – one sponsor of the World of Plumbing and Mechanical – understands the need for a workforce in his industry. He says people might not consider plumbing as a trade, but he thinks a lot of people would enjoy his line of work. Once the economy and industries pick-up he says there will be a lot of work and wants students to know that a lot of opportunities will be available.

One of this year's SkillsUSA competitors, 18-year-old Ashley Bird, was eagerly awaiting her turn to show what she's made of. Ashley and her teammates, students from Mary Persons High School, were going to compete in the TeamWorks competition. Although she was the only girl on the team of four, she wasn't scared. She said that sometimes she gets looks, and that there is a little bit of pressure, but that she doesn't let it get to her. She likes the Expo because it "gives students, especially seniors help to find jobs." When it comes to herself, she knows she will go somewhere in construction.

Another Expo has come to an end, but for many it's a new beginning. Once again CEFGA and its

industry partners proved that the bridge can be gapped between industry and education. And their way of doing it is educational and a whole lot of fun!