

MBIT adult evening courses pave the way to new skills

Regina Young

Carpentry isn't exactly Justin Knapp's forte, which wouldn't be such a problem if his second home was like his first – new construction.

Repairs and renovations have also, admittedly, never been Jon Nelson's area of expertise, although he wants to have the skills to take on different projects around the house. More than that, he'd like to possess the ability to do something really special: build a tree house for his son.

"I truly, solely wanted to do this – I joked around in the beginning – to increase my man card," Nelson quips before the start of an adult carpentry course that he and Knapp are taking at Middle Bucks Institute of Technology in Jamison. "... I'm a typical business-corporate guy, so I'm not in carpentry, but I've always been impressed with the skill."

By comparison, peer Sean McGinley is already "somewhat handy." Though his education has prepared him for a career in the electrical field, he'd like to "get another skill or two underneath my belt," he says, to broaden his appeal to future employers.

As the rest of their peers filter in, a similar scene – where homeowners are learning side-by-side with trade industry professionals – is unfolding in an electricity course offered by MBIT, which, in addition to serving high school students, has provided learning opportunities to adults for more than 40 years. The MBIT Adult Education Program consists of day programs, custom industry training for employers, online courses and adult evening courses.

Adult evening courses run twice a year (fall and spring) and offer the opportunity to explore new subjects in a cost-effective and time efficient



Sean McGinley secures trim around a door inside Middle Bucks Institute of Technology's construction lab.



Students enrolled in MBIT's adult evening electricity course work on a wiring project.

way, according to MBIT's website. Subjects include construction (carpentry and electricity), manufacturing, HVAC and plumbing, health and human services, computers, welding, drafting and design, and automotive.

During the 2014-15 school year, 560 adults took advantage of education classes at MBIT, and as many individuals are expected to attend classes during the current school year, said Marjorie Devlin, MBIT's Adult Education coordinator. Led by qualified instructors, the courses are designed to help individuals achieve a wide range of personal goals – whether that goal is to build a tree house, develop a practical skill or enhance a resume.

"The students in our adult evening school program home maintenance courses – such as electrical, carpentry, HVAC and plumbing – are people who work in these industries who would like to

improve their on-the-job skills and also homeowners who are interested in saving money on home repair," Devlin noted.

Whether he's teaching homeowners about safety codes or helping industry professionals take a step forward in their careers, the universal goal is to give students "the confidence to do the work that they want to do," says electricity course instructor Mike Kephart, who also works as New Hope-Solebury School District's HVAC technician/electrician.

Students who enrolled in the fall electricity course taught by Kephart included electrician Jon MacNamara, who participated in a MBIT program as a high schooler, and Buckingham homeowners Cheryl Smith and Don Garrett. The pair, who have already completed the adult evening plumbing class, are preparing to take on a series of challenging home projects.

"We're going to try to finish our basement ourselves, but we have one more class to take after this," Smith says, with Garrett adding that they also aspire to put in a backup generator.

The electricity course engages students in several wiring projects, providing a hands-on learning environment that Garrett has found both educational and enjoyable.

"It's a fun class," he says. "My background is computer engineering and I'm used to engineering classes, sitting at a computer. But this is different for me."

Over the fall, the carpentry class met two nights a week for five weeks and was led by instructor John Ciavola, Council Rock School District's maintenance carpenter. During the course, Nelson, Knapp, McGinley and the five other members of the class learned about framing floors, sheathing and drywalling, rough-in electricity and plumbing, insulation installation and spackling. They built walls; set and installed a door frame; created a windowsill and installed trim.

"This class is a great foundation for the fundamentals of learning carpentry, specifically drywall and installation – things that are so applicable around the house," Knapp says before adding that having a setting where he can use tools and receive instructor feedback has been key to the learning process.

"What's really helped me is learning how to use a miter saw, use a circular saw – the proper techniques," he says. "The math and the measuring I feel very comfortable with, but it's the application – learning how to use the tools in your hands. The best way to learn is just by doing it and having a great instructor who gets the ball rolling."

"If you're watching something on YouTube or anything like that, once you do it you don't know if you've done it right or wrong," McGinley points out. "... Hands-on, with a teacher or instructor, is way better."

Ciavola has been instructing adult evening courses at MBIT since the spring of 2015.

"One of the great joys for me is just to be able to pass along the trade," he says. "I had phenomenal instructors and teachers when I went through my apprenticeship program, both in the classroom and on the job. I'm just trying to pass it along to students and anyone who is interested in learning the trade. That's a goal I hope I achieved."

And it would certainly seem that Ciavola accomplished this mission.

Nelson's skill level has increased dramatically, he says during the second-to-last session of the fall course. After being shown how to properly handle a circular saw, he felt so comfortable using the tool that he went out and purchased one the next day. Before the final week of class, he had already built a fence and installed cabinets in his house.

"You have eight people with totally different backgrounds in this class," he says, "and it's been absolutely valuable to each of us."

And, as Nelson's grin indicates, to their significant others as well.

"I was actually thinking: The only negative of this class is my honey-do list has increased drastically," he says.

Registration is open for MBIT's spring adult evening courses. For a schedule and description of classes, which begin the first week in February, visit mbit.org (click adult education). For information, call 215-343-2480 x108.

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MBIT adult evening course instructor John Ciavola, front row, left, with five of the eight students who enrolled in the fall carpentry course: Tyler Barnes and Jon Nelson, back row; and Justin Knapp, Zach Cockler and Sean McGinley, front row.

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