

Two Big Days, One Limitless Future

Record Attendance at 2018 CareerExpo and SkillsUSA State Championships Illustrates CEFGA's Impact in Connecting Construction Industry Leaders with Tomorrow's Workforce

By Allen Allnoch

At the 2018 CEFGA CareerExpo and SkillsUSA State Championships on March 22-23, all signs pointed to a bright outlook for the future of Georgia's construction industry.

On paper alone, the numbers were encouraging: 8,246 total attendees - a new event record - including 5,534 students, 1,158 influencers (teachers, parents, counselors and school administrators) and 1,554 industry volunteers, exhibitors and other guests.

And on the Georgia International Convention Center floor, the energy was palpable as those thousands of students visited 17 industry "Worlds," and more than 400 high school and technical college students competed in 18 SkillsUSA contests.

The Worlds included three industries represented for the first time at the Expo: Hand & Power Tools, Fire Protection and Roofing. The latter was perhaps the most visible of all 17, thanks to a towering scaffold with an 8/12-pitch roof segment for students to climb.

Ron Heath, Vice President of Roof Depot, led the effort to bring roofing to the Expo after seeing it for the first time the previous year. Scanning the cavernous room from atop the 20-foot-high exhibit, Heath commended CEFGA for its approach to building a sustainable talent pool for the industry.

"For workplace development, this event is perfect," Heath said. "The K-12 Pipeline is highly important as well, and we've hired some people from the Construction Ready program. It's a great approach - they're capturing people through each of these means."

CEFGA's three-pronged strategy to which Heath alluded - CareerExpo, Construction Ready training for adults and K-12 Pipeline for students - has been expanded to include a fourth component. The CEFGA Connect initiative debuted during the Expo and links students directly with employers. All four work hand in hand toward fulfilling CEFGA's mission of "Building Opportunities for Georgia."

"This was our biggest and most successful event by far," said CEFGA President and CEO Scott Shelar. "Our industry partners are always very positive about this event, but this year was exceptional. They loved seeing the increased number of students. They also commented on the quality of the students, noting that many were sincerely curious about careers in construction. I think the addition of CEFGA Connect was appreciated by all, both students and employers. We are just so thankful to all of the em-

employers who make this event possible and to the teachers and counselors who choose to bring their students to our event.”

With Georgia ranking as the leading state in which to do business for five years running, job opportunities continue to grow, as does the need for a skilled construction workforce. And with so many students and influencers gathered in one location for the CareerExpo, employers recognize the event as a valuable investment toward meeting that need.

By Shelar’s estimate, industry representatives served some 24,000 volunteer hours during the Expo. The presence of high-profile names around the show floor - including Home Depot, sponsor of the new World of Hand & Power Tools - speaks to that investment as well.

Jeff Ensell, Recruiting and Development Manager for Marietta-based contractor C.W. Matthews, said his companies keeps six to eight reps on the show floor, plus more in the hands-on World of Heavy Equipment & Utility Contracting outside the building.

“If a student comes by who wants to be a welder, well, we use welders, too,” Ensell said. “If somebody wants to get into construction, we do construction, too. We have all aspects of our business represented, and it’s a big benefit to have so many people involved.”

CEFGA’s leadership in organizing such a monumental event is not lost on the employers who exhibit and sponsor competitions there.

“They’re talking to the contractors, they’re figuring out what the industry needs, they’re supporting it in all different aspects,” said Nathan Tucker, Tradesman Manager for JE Dunn Construction. “That’s huge for us. We want to support it as contractors, but we’ve got a job to do; we want to try to find [potential employees], but we can’t do that day in and day out, so they help us find people.”

For Matthew Colvin, State Initiatives Director for the Georgia Department of Economic Development’s Workforce Division, raising awareness about opportunities in construction is critical to Georgia’s economic future. Schools are fertile ground for doing so; Georgia now has more than 150 high school construction programs, for example, with more than 17,000 students enrolled in them.

“With the older generation starting to retire,” Colvin said, “we’re really trying to get involved with middle school and high school students, and also trying to educate their parents and their career counselors, who may not necessarily be aware of some of these career paths in the skilled trades. The kids are there, they have talent, they’re driven; we just have to put them in a position where they understand what the opportunities are.”

Thus the importance of the “E” in CEFGA - Education. Chris Bell, Southeast Self-Perform Work Leader for DPR Construction, said CEFGA is “definitely leading the way in Georgia in educating the community about construction careers. And not that it’s just hot, outside work - that there are other things you can do in construction that are fun, that are rewarding, that are challenging.”

Matt Arthur, Technical College System of Georgia Commissioner, agreed. “CEFGA is *the* leader in building that workforce in Georgia,” Arthur said. “They do a great job of working with high schools, middle schools and colleges, and getting the word out that jobs are available.”