

Capital Area Construction Council

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Students learn about construction careers - and get to run some cool machinery

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MASON - Everett High School junior Manyara May, 17, said she hadn't really thought about a career in construction before Tuesday.

But as she dug dirt with a backhoe - "I was the best at it," she said with a smile - she said the thought creeped into her mind.

"It could be a possibility," she said. "It's given me a different thought because I've never thought about construction before."

Manyara's potential construction conversion was a goal of the Michigan Construction Career Days, which continue today at the Ingham County Fairgrounds in Mason, said event co-coordinator Brindley Byrd of Michigan Works.

This is the first year of the event, though similar programs are in place in 29 other states.

About 1,000 middle and high school students from across the state operated cranes, bulldozers and other construction equipment Tuesday while learning about potential careers in the industry. Another 1,000 are expected today.

"Most young people don't think that you can have a career in construction; they think it's just a job you have for a summer," Byrd said.

Steve Higgins, a training coordinator with Lansing-based AIS Construction Equipment, said companies will be looking to hire about 40,000 more workers in Michigan in the next few years as older workers begin to retire. And that's if the state's economy doesn't improve.

Workers with about two years of experience can expect to make anywhere from \$40,000 a year as a backhoe operator to up to \$90,000 a year as a crane operator, depending on the complexity of the job, Byrd said.

"It certainly beats flipping burgers," he said.

Holt High School junior Lawrence Hornus, 16, said he had planned to go into construction before the event. Through a partnership between the Ingham and Eaton intermediate school districts, he is taking a class in heavy equipment operation and repair.

"Unless something happens that I couldn't do it, I'll most likely get into a career doing this," Lawrence said.

As to what made up his mind, he said it's the chance to work outside, the chance to work with his hands and, naturally, the chance to earn a good living doing so. "That might be swaying me over a

little bit," he conceded with a laugh.

Higgins said it's critical for construction firms to recruit potential employees at a young age so they stay motivated during technical classes - like algebra, geometry and science - that they'll need in the working world.

"You would be surprised about how many kids are swayed one way or the other at days like this," he said.

"You've got to start when these kids are this age," he added. "If we don't get their interest, something else will."

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