

# Sectoral training helps workers climb career ladders to success

BY DUANE M. ELLING

Thousands of workers are awakening to more hopeful economic futures, thanks to their participation in sectoral employment development programs.

Shortly before 4 a.m., 55-year-old Ralph "Mike" Michelbrink finishes his morning coffee and walks from the warmth of his Cleveland home to a nearby bus stop. The chilly, starless April sky hints at the rain showers forecast for later in the day.

Yet, despite the early hour and the prospect of a 90-minute bus ride to work, Mike is eager to start the day. In 2001, after living for several frustrating years on workers' compensation — the result of a construction accident in which he suffered a broken neck — he re-entered the workforce, making and repairing diamond-tipped cutting tools for the metalworking industry.

"It's always dark when I leave for work and it's usually still dark when I finally get there," said Mike, whose shift at E.C. Kitzel & Sons begins at 6 a.m.

"But that's fine, just as long as I have this job to go to. It's a good life."

Each day, Michelbrink and thousands of other workers across the United States are awakening to new careers and more hopeful economic futures, thanks in large part to their participation in sectoral employment development programs.<sup>1</sup>



Ralph "Mike" Michelbrink is employed as a tool-maker in the metalworking industry.

<sup>1</sup>To learn more about Michelbrink and two other sectoral employment program participants, see page 10.

# Evaluation to answer key questions

The launch of a random assignment evaluation of sectoral employment development programs is a natural step forward in the Mott Foundation's long-standing support of that field.

Mott has made more than \$52 million in sectoral-related grants since 1986, including support for site-based programs, national networks and outcome studies. The current evaluation — supported by grants totaling \$5 million — will build upon these activities by attempting to answer a key critical question: Do low-income and unemployed workers who go through quality sectoral programs experience more significant and lasting impacts on their earnings and careers than individuals not receiving these services?

"The earlier evaluations we funded were the first to look at employment, job retention and earning outcomes from the sectoral approach, and whether or not sectoral programs could be replicated," said Jack A. Litzenberg, Senior Program Officer.

"The controls built into the current study should help demonstrate any real cause and effect between participation in sectoral programs and changes in worker income, placement and job retention. Those findings are key to shaping the future of the country's job training system."

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), a Philadelphia-based research and policy organization working to affect social issues related to youth and employment, was selected to design and conduct the evaluation with the support of a six-year, \$3.5-million Mott grant.

Planning activities for the evaluation began in 2002 with the review of almost 30 sectoral programs nominated by experts from throughout the nation's workforce development system. Of the 15 nominees that indicated

possible interest in participating in a random-assignment study, seven were selected for further consideration. Ultimately, three programs were chosen.

The evaluation will incorporate a formal "test and control" model, with 900 of the planned 1,800 participants randomly selected to enroll in the study programs. The remaining 900 participants will have an 18-month waiting period before they are eligible to enroll in those programs, but they will retain the opportunity throughout that period to self-enroll in other employment and job-training initiatives in their communities.

Surveys conducted 18 months following the participants' initial contact with the programs will collect data on how the two groups fare on issues of employment and job retention, wage progression, and earnings potential. P/PV will conduct ongoing analysis of that data, issuing periodic reports on relevant findings.

According to Mark Elliott, executive vice president of P/PV, this design is critical to answering questions about the strategy's true impact on employment opportunities and notes that the findings ultimately may result in improved access to such programs throughout the country.

"Currently, there is considerable skepticism among policymakers about workforce programs' potential to have a genuine impact on participants' employment and earnings. This evaluation, if successful, will explain how sectoral programs can meet that challenge."

The three participating programs, which each received 27-month, \$500,000 grants from Mott, are:

## **Jewish Vocational Services, Boston, Massachusetts**

Each year, Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) helps

Such programs prepare employees to work successfully within a particular industry or "sector" by providing them with job-specific education and training, as well as access to living-wage employment within the given trade. Many also offer a range of supportive services — including life-skills development, specialized counseling and case management — to help workers overcome barriers in their career path.

In addition, the sectoral employment field is helping shape the nation's labor market by involving employers within specific industries in the design and implementation of regional sectoral training programs and assisting them

in developing and sustaining living-wage career opportunities for low-income and unemployed workers.

Since sectoral employment was named and defined in a 1996 Aspen Institute report entitled *Jobs and the Urban Poor: Privately Initiated Sectoral Strategies*, researchers and practitioners have hailed the sectoral approach as a promising strategy for engaging individuals in the nation's workforce while meeting the employment needs of businesses. The Mott Foundation, through its Pathways Out of Poverty program, has provided more than \$52 million in grants since 1986 in support of what are now called sectoral programs and

approximately 1,250 Boston-area residents obtain living-wage employment in various careers via sector-focused training and a range of supportive services, including career planning, life skills development, and individualized counseling. Participants in the new Mott-funded evaluation will be trained in medical office skills, computerized accounting or office computer skills.

JVS, a non-sectarian organization founded in 1938, also offers services that address the unique employment needs of the region's immigrant population, including cultural counseling and training on workplace standards in the United States.

Erin Flynn, vice president of development at JVS, believes that securing living-wage employment is just the first step toward a worker's long-term success. JVS staff also encourages graduates to become self-directed learners and to develop confidence in their ability to create sustainable, enriching careers.

"We help them recognize their abilities and what they can accomplish further down the road. Once they come to believe in themselves and the opportunities open to them, there's no limit to what they can do."

#### **Per Scholas, Bronx, New York**

Since 1995, Per Scholas has coordinated a rigorous, 18-week training program designed to help economically disadvantaged New York residents become certified computer technicians. The program connects 165 workers each year to career opportunities at such companies as AOL Time Warner Inc., Pitney Bowes Inc. and Smith Barney.

In addition to sectoral training, Per Scholas offers reconditioned, Internet-ready computers at minimal cost to low-income families in an effort to help bridge the "digital divide" in their communities. The organization also recycles "dead" computers, monitors and printers into reusable raw materials, providing area

companies with an environmentally friendly option to dispose of obsolete equipment.

For Deborah MacFarlane, president and CEO of Per Scholas, an effective sectoral program requires more than a quality curriculum and specialized training. It also necessitates being absolutely certain that those individuals who successfully complete the course have living-wage jobs waiting for them.

"The implied promise of job training that needs to become explicit is that, if students do their part, then we as programs will do ours by not stopping until they have a job."

#### **Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) is a membership-based organization of Milwaukee-area employers and trade unions that annually help more than 400 low-income and unemployed workers throughout the region prepare for, and connect to, family-supporting jobs. The organization, founded in 1996, offers training in construction, health care and manufacturing, with an emphasis on long-term career advancement.

WRTP is also a nationally recognized workforce intermediary, helping draw job opportunities, financial resources, training providers and job seekers into Milwaukee's workforce development system.

According to Executive Director Eric Parker, WRTP's success in the sectoral approach is due in large part to its program staff, many of whom are recruited from the very industries they now partner with. He notes that such experience promotes understanding of the challenges facing program participants and strengthens relationships with business leaders.

"[The staff] understands the job opportunities available, as well as the training and skills needed for employees to make it in their field. It's that knowledge that helps win the day for our graduates."

field studies, including \$5 million in 2003 for the launch of a rigorous, random assignment evaluation designed to test the strategy and its outcomes. (See above.)

However, while the sectoral approach continues to showcase its strengths, policy restrictions on the use of federal funds for job training, coupled with the nation's current economic downturn, have left many such programs struggling financially at a time when the need for their services is rising.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, businesses that rely on sectoral programs to maintain a qualified workforce are looking to those partnerships

to supply employees who are more highly skilled than ever.

Such challenges have placed the field of sectoral workforce development at a crossroads, with industries, practitioners, communities and philanthropy joining together to secure the future economic success of low-income and unemployed workers.

### **A PROMISING STRATEGY EVOLVES**

Many workforce development programs created since the 1960s have attempted to incorporate a sector-oriented focus into their

<sup>2</sup>For a primer on federal and state workforce development policies, go to [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org).

efforts to connect workers to the job market. Among the organizations to adopt the approach successfully is Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA), a worker-owned, home health-care service agency located in the Bronx and founded in 1985 by Community Service Society of New York.

The program, which was the recipient of Mott's first sectoral employment-related grant in 1986, works to improve the quality of care for homebound patients by enriching the careers of those engaged in the home health-care field. CHCA provides its participants with intensive field training; continuing education opportunities; a career ladder program that leads to positions as licensed practical nurses, assistant instructors and job counselors; and a board of directors comprised largely of CHCA employees. To date, more than 1,700 women from low-income households have graduated from the program and gained higher-wage employment in the home health-care field. CHCA currently employs 750 home health aides.

For Steven Dawson, president of the Bronx-based Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute — a nonprofit employment and advocacy organization and Mott grantee that assists several workforce programs, including CHCA — the success of the sectoral strategy is due in large part to its capacity for inspiring enlightened self-interest among stakeholders.

He notes that because sectoral programs are based within a specific industry, they are positioned to give practitioners and participants critical insight into the social, political and economic forces acting upon that industry. This also helps an industry recognize its own role and responsibility within the community, and fosters an environment of shared understanding and appreciation among stakeholders.

"[The sectoral approach] puts a human face on the work — real people doing real work with real employers," Dawson said. "That's a departure from the norm of looking at workforce development in a vague, abstract way."



Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute assists in the training and employment of home health-care workers.

Many in the field see such relationships between program and industry as a critical link to the sectoral strategy's longevity and ultimate success. When asked to identify those factors that characterize a quality sectoral partnership, business leaders and practitioners point to mutual trust, understanding and respect as being high on their lists.

Mary Peña, executive director of Project QUEST Inc. — a sectoral employment program in San Antonio, Texas, and a Mott grantee — believes that in order to achieve such relationships, stakeholders must actively communicate with each other and feel confident that their respective needs and concerns are being given due consideration. She also notes that the fruits of those labors often don't appear overnight:

"As a program, you need to be very persistent, engaging [employers] in dialogue, showing them that you really do understand their industry and that you are committed to not just meeting, but exceeding, their

expectations. That's what leads to real interest and genuine partnership."

Project QUEST, founded in 1992, helps participants prepare for careers in the health-care and medical fields; information technology and business services; and mechanical-related installation, maintenance and repair. Peña notes that the program's success in connecting graduates to living-wage jobs in those industries is largely because local executives have come to recognize that recruiting Project QUEST graduates is a positive gesture toward the community and one that makes good business sense.

Randy Ray, manager of training and development at Standard Aero Inc. in San Antonio, agrees with Peña. As the company started repairing aircraft engines for the U.S. Air Force in 1999, Standard Aero executives began exploring ways to fill an anticipated gap in the company's workforce. When contacted by Project QUEST staff regarding possible recruitment of that program's graduates, Ray decided to give the idea a chance.

"I invited them over and said, 'OK, show me what you've got.' They responded with an insider's understanding of our industry, the work we were doing and what we needed in our employees. It was clear that the program was a great fit with our goals as a business."

Standard Aero soon joined Project QUEST and a local community college in establishing a venture-specific job-training curriculum. The project, launched in February 2001, has graduated 25 formerly low-income and unemployed workers, 24 of whom work at the company.

Ray says Standard Aero saves more than \$100,000 annually by hiring employees who are ready to begin meeting the company's needs on day one of their new jobs.

"The company saves money, but we also get a career-hungry, motivated employee who really wants to work," he said. "They in turn become taxpayers and consumers, investing back into their community. It's a win-win situation."

This capacity of sectoral programs to fill an important niche in the U.S. labor market, while at the same time helping low-income families gain economic stability, is increasingly recognized as a vital addition to the country's workforce development system.

James Head is president of the National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC), an Oakland, California-based nonprofit and Mott grantee providing advocacy and technical assistance on issues of economic development in low-income communities. He notes that while some



Mechanical-related installation, maintenance and repair are among the programs available to participants in Project QUEST Inc.



Focus: HOPE enrolls approximately 750 participants each year for training in advanced manufacturing/ engineering and information technology.

publicly funded job training centers initially expressed concern regarding possible duplication of services or displaced relationships with employers, most have come to view the ability of sectoral programs to focus on particular industries as an important complement to an overall workforce development plan.

“The intention of [sectoral programs] is not to replace the ‘one-stop’ job centers, but to supplement them.”

## EVALUATIONS

### DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS

For many practitioners, proof that the sectoral approach works is evident in the thousands of program graduates around the country who have secured living-wage jobs and restored their families’ economic well-being. Yet, they and funders recognize that formal evaluations are necessary if sectoral programs are to garner wider acceptance within the workforce development system and, equally important, greater support among policymakers.

This knowledge led Mott to fund three such assessments of sectoral programs in recent years, including this year’s launch of a five-year, random assignment study to be conducted by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) of Philadelphia. This evaluation will examine the short- and long-term career outcomes of graduates from

three high-performing sectoral employment programs, and compare those results to the outcomes for individuals from the same regions who do not participate in the programs.

For Jack A. Litzenberg, Senior Program Officer at the Foundation, the study will help answer questions on how sectoral training programs benefit workers seeking living-wage employment.

“Mott grantmaking in sectoral employment has been one of discovery, of supporting the field’s efforts to develop the strategy, to show what works and to impact those policies that can expand its accessibility among low-income and unemployed workers.”

The new evaluation is expected to build on the findings of the two other Mott-funded studies.

The first found:

- Sectoral graduates worked an average of almost three months more in the year after completing the program than they did the year prior; and
- The proportion of participants working full-time increased from 60 percent to 75 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The second found:

- A year after completing a sectoral program, participants made an average of almost \$2 an hour more in their primary job and almost \$3 an hour more the second year;
- Overall earnings rose from an average of \$4,100 the year before participants entered the program to more than \$13,600 in the year following their completion and to almost \$17,000 two years after training; and
- Two years after training, 39 percent of participants had lifted themselves out of poverty, based on their personal earnings alone.<sup>4</sup>

Milwaukee-based Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, launched in 1996 and one of the three sectoral programs chosen for the new study, annually places more than 400 workers in health care, construction and manufacturing.

<sup>3</sup>*Gearing Up: An Interim Report on the Sectoral Employment Initiative*. Public/Private Ventures, September 2001.

<sup>4</sup>*Closing the Gap: How Sectoral Workforce Development Programs Benefit the Working Poor*. Aspen Institute, September 2001.

Executive Director Eric Parker notes that, while his staff is curious to see how their graduates perform in comparison to those of other programs in the study, the ultimate reward will be if the results convince policymakers to channel more funding into sectoral strategies.

"I believe that this type of evaluation will help demonstrate that the sectoral approach makes a significant difference in helping workers obtain good-paying, career-ladder jobs. It will allow us to go back to those who shape workforce policy and say, 'This does work and it's been proven in a rigorous way.'"

Barbara Rosenbaum, president and CEO of Jewish Vocational Service in Boston — also a participant in the study — believes that the findings could loosen restrictions on funding for post-employment development activities, a critical component of many sectoral initiatives. She notes that such limitations make it difficult for programs to provide those follow-up services — such as counseling and case management — that help participants continue to move forward in their careers after they have entered the job market.

"The cost/benefit analysis that will come from this evaluation can help bring the sectoral approach to the attention of lawmakers and show them what it means to the future of poor and unemployed families. I'm also confident that it will lead to a whole new level of advocacy and information sharing within the field, which will further propel the strategy forward."

### **NEXT STEPS FOR SECTORAL**

While the P/PV study will not be completed for several years, sectoral practitioners are using lessons already learned to strengthen their own programs and support the launch of new initiatives. Many say the current slump in the nation's job market makes it imperative that the sectoral field continues to move forward, building on its existing strengths by establishing new strategies for workforce development.

Ken Kudek, assistant director at Focus: HOPE in Detroit, believes that such flexibility

will be key to helping sectoral programs not only weather the nation's economic storm, but also emerge stronger. The organization, a Mott grantee founded in 1968 and offering employment training since 1981, enrolls approximately 750 participants each year for careers in advanced manufacturing/engineering and information technology.

Kudek says that by following and understanding economic, regional and labor market trends, sectoral programs will be better prepared in the coming years to ensure that participants receive the education and training that will keep them skilled and on the cutting edge of what employers need.

"[Participants] must not only be trained in today's technology, they must also 'learn forward' to what the employer is going to look for in the future. Doing that successfully requires that we maintain strong ties and communication with our sector partners."

Martin Mulloy, executive director of North American labor affairs and employee relations at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn — a



WIRE-Net's NASA training program provides practical hands-on experience for participants.

sectoral partner of Focus: HOPE — agrees with Kudek’s assessment. He says that in the future many industries, particularly manufacturing, will be looking for workers who possess even higher skills. He also believes that those employers will search out new partners, such as sectoral programs, to help close the skill/availability gaps.

“If the [sectoral field] is going to continue to succeed,” Mulloy said, “it needs to thoroughly understand what jobs are out there, what skills employers are looking for, and how that knowledge can be used to connect employees to the right opportunities.”

Other key challenges facing sectoral partners are the unique job training needs of the country’s growing immigrant populations; promoting awareness of sectoral strategies throughout the private and public arenas; and encouraging business leaders to call for public policies that provide financial support and systems change throughout the nation’s workforce development system.

John Colm is executive director of the Cleveland-based Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network (WIRE-Net), an employer-based membership organization and Mott grantee that sponsors sectoral programs at various training institutions, including NASA. WIRE-Net, founded in 1988, has helped more than 300 workers connect to living-wage careers in the region’s manufacturing-related industries.

He notes that several industries, including manufacturing and health care, face a shrinking pool of qualified applicants to fill vacant positions in the coming years. Colm believes that support from within the field,



Sectoral program participants receive guidance to help them move forward in their careers after they enter the job market.

such as NEDLC’s National Network of Sector Partners,<sup>5</sup> will play a vital role in helping programs meet the demands of public advocacy while providing services to clients.

“It’s a difficult balancing act, pushing public agencies to look at the issues differently, while at the same time trying to perform and bring people into the workforce. But we need to help folks understand that job training has to focus on those things that actually work, not those that simply satisfy bureaucratic sense.”

Kudek agrees, noting that increasing public pressure is needed to prompt policymakers to modify the nation’s workforce development system and to improve its effectiveness at preparing low-income and unemployed workers for living-wage careers. For Kudek, such changes are critical to the future well-being of all residents.

“Any hesitancy on the part of our society to invest in a human being — including helping them find a job and become a valued member of the larger community — is a tragic error.” ■

<sup>5</sup>The National Network of Sector Partners provides information and resources to its members in the sectoral field, in addition to promoting sectoral initiatives as valuable tools for enhancing employment and economic opportunities for low-income individuals, families and communities. The network was founded in 1999 with funding from the Mott, Ford, Annie E. Casey, and William and Flora Hewlett foundations.

# Related Resources

## ON THE WEB

An interview with Jack A. Litzenberg, Senior Program Officer in Mott's Pathways Out of Poverty program, on the Foundation's involvement in the field of sectoral employment development is available online at [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org).

Portions of a sectoral employment programs video produced by the National Economic Development and Law Center are also available online at [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org). The video includes footage of two Mott grantees.

Additional resources providing information related to the sectoral programs profiled in this document and the overall field of sectoral employment include:

- Cooperative Home Care Associates: [www.paraprofessional.org/sections/chca.htm](http://www.paraprofessional.org/sections/chca.htm)
- Focus: HOPE: [www.focushope.edu](http://www.focushope.edu)
- Jewish Vocational Services: [www.jvs-boston.org](http://www.jvs-boston.org)
- National Economic Development and Law Center: [www.nedlc.org](http://www.nedlc.org)
- National Network of Sector Partners: [www.nedlc.org/nnspp](http://www.nedlc.org/nnspp)
- Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute: [www.paraprofessional.org](http://www.paraprofessional.org)
- Project QUEST, Inc.: [www.questsa.com](http://www.questsa.com)
- Public/Private Ventures: [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org)
- Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network: [www.wire-net.org](http://www.wire-net.org)
- Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership: [www.wrtp.org](http://www.wrtp.org)

## PUBLICATIONS

The following Mott Foundation publications are available at [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org) for downloading or ordering:

- *Mott Mosaic*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 2003). The cover article and sidebar in this magazine discuss the sectoral employment development program under way in Flint, Michigan, the Foundation's hometown.
- *Transformation: Person by Person, Community by Community* (2002). This special report on grassroots grantmaking, taken from the Foundation's *2001 Annual Report*, includes a profile of two individuals helped through Project QUEST Inc.
- *@mott.now*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (May 1998). This newsletter describes 10 Mott grantees involved in an earlier evaluation of their sectoral programs conducted by Public/Private Ventures of Philadelphia.
- *Jobs and the Urban Poor: Privately Initiated Sectoral Strategies* (1996). This report, written by the Aspen Institute of Washington, D.C., assesses the potential of sectoral strategies as a tool for alleviating urban poverty.

The following grantee publications describe the results of sectoral evaluations done for the Mott Foundation:

- *Gearing Up: An Interim Report on the Sectoral Employment Initiative*. (2001) This report by Public/Private Ventures is available at [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org). Click on "Publications."
- *Closing the Gap: How Sectoral Workforce Development Programs Benefit the Working Poor*. (2001) This is one of several sectoral-related reports published by the Aspen Institute and available at [www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org). Click on "Bookstore," keyword "sectoral."

# Participants highlight sectoral success

Each year, thousands of low-income and unemployed workers recreate their careers with the help of sectoral employment development programs. Here are brief profiles of three individuals who changed their lives through Mott-funded sectoral initiatives.

## SHARON MARTIN

*Cooperative Home Care Associates*

When Sharon walked through the doors of Bronx-based Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) in 1999, she had 13 years of experience in the home health-care field. While she deeply enjoyed her work, she had grown increasingly frustrated with the lack of career and wage advancement for workers with limited formal training.

"I had the experience, but without the education to back it up, I wasn't eligible for many of the promotions that I was interested in. I was working full-time and loved helping my clients, but I just wasn't getting any further ahead," said the 49-year-old grandmother of two.

Then she witnessed the experience of a former co-worker who had enrolled in CHCA's sectoral-based, home health-care training program. Not only did the woman gain a higher-wage job and desirable employee benefit package, but also she told Sharon about the program's career-ladder component, which helps employees work toward positions in the field as licensed practical nurses and within the company as assistant instructors and job counselors.

Sharon enrolled in CHCA two weeks later. The program, which she describes as being intense but rewarding, taught her new technical skills related to home health care, as well as strategies for working effectively with difficult clients and concerned family members.

Today, Sharon is completing a two-year



Sharon Martin

term as a CHCA board member, is building her professional skills through a position as a data entry processor in the organization, and is continuing to provide direct care to home-bound clients every other weekend.

"It's almost as though I have a dual career right now, and both are very fulfilling. Sometimes I feel as though I should pinch myself, just to make sure this is really happening. But it is happening and that makes me just about the luckiest person there is."

Sharon will be attending community college this fall to study nursing.

## SHANTEL MOONEY

*Project QUEST Inc.*

For 26-year-old Shantel, experiencing the extremes of life's highs and lows has offered her an important but not altogether easy lesson: from hard times come strong people.

In 1998, Shantel left the U.S. Navy for civilian life, confident that her naval training in turbine engineering had prepared her for a good paying job in her hometown of San Antonio, Texas. However, when work

opportunities proved elusive, Shantel and her four children — including the 12-year-old son of her now deceased godmother — soon found themselves trying to survive on her income from a string of part-time, low-wage jobs.

“The kids and I were living in a low-income apartment complex and I was turned down for every good job I applied for because I didn’t have the experience or training they were looking for. It seemed as though everything was going wrong with my life.”

Then, in 2001, Shantel heard about the sectoral training programs of San Antonio-based Project QUEST Inc. She enrolled in the organization’s mechanical production and repair curriculum, and received training specific to working on aircraft. Three months after graduation, Shantel began working at Boeing Aerospace Support Center in San Antonio as a production assistant on planes destined for the U.S. Air Force.

Shantel credits the Project QUEST program with not only preparing her for a good job with a living wage, but also for supporting her efforts and encouraging her to believe in herself and her abilities. Among her current goals are the purchase of a new home and car, and eventually the launch of her own auto repair shop. Shantel has little doubt that, in time, she will bring each dream to reality.

“I know now that I can do it, that I have what it takes. And I know that I owe my success in large part to Project QUEST.”



Shantel Mooney

## **RALPH “MIKE” MICHELBRINK**

*Westside Industrial Retention  
and Expansion Network*

Asked how he felt as he prepared to undertake the rigors of studying and homework in 1999 after more than three decades out of school, 55-year-old Mike responds with a deep-throated chuckle.

“Oh boy! After that many years, I wasn’t too sure what to expect or whether I was ready for it. But I knew it was what I needed to do if I was going to get my life back on track, so I just stepped up to it.”

Mike, who suffered a debilitating and seemingly career-ending construction accident in 1997, now recalls with quiet, understated pride his training in precision machining at Westside Industrial Retention and Expansion Network (WIRE-Net) in Cleveland. He remains particularly impressed with WIRE-Net’s instructional team, whose professional backgrounds included work at NASA.

“They are always there, ready to help you learn the right way to get the job done. But they also encourage you and give you a little push forward, which can make a big difference when you’re starting over.”

The many nights spent studying math, blueprint reading and machinery have more than paid off for Mike. His new job at Cleveland-based E.C. Kitzel & Sons, where he makes and repairs diamond-tipped cutting tools for the metalworking industry, offers him a living wage, benefits and a satisfying work environment.

While Mike believes that sectoral programs like WIRE-Net are critical to helping workers connect to good jobs, he also notes that it is ultimately up to participants to make the most of the experience and of their futures.

“[The programs] put everything there that you need, but you have to pay attention, put your nose to the grindstone and put in as much effort as it takes to move forward. When you do that, it can change the rest of your life.” ■

# MEMO

## Credits

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