

DRIVING change

Weirs Buick GMC makes \$25,000 donation to SRTC's Automotive Collision Repair program

Linda Zuke at Weirs Buick GMC put her money where her mouth is.

"I just want to get kids excited about going into the trades BEFORE they graduate," she said. "I walked into SRTC — and everything is light and bright, shiny and new — and said "this is AWESOME!"

The Arundel car dealer and auto-body shop in Arundel recently donated \$25,000 to the Sanford Regional Technical Center through the Sanford Schools Legacy Foundation. Its course is now named the Weirs Buick GMC Automotive Collision Repair Program.

And, of course, Weirs also helped get the department off the ground before the new school opened in 2017 with a large donation to the Automotive Technology program.

The future starts locally at Sanford Regional Technical Center.

"The whole idea behind wanting to support SRTC started because we have to figure out how we get kids involved in the trades," said Zuke, Weirs Dealer Principal and Owner. "Staffing is a serious, serious problem here and across the country. I've got to do something. I need technicians! We need to feed the tech schools with kids from high school, which then feeds our shops."

She and Weirs Collision Center Manager Bob Bernard were also inspired by their recent hire, Sanford High School Class of 2021 graduate Amer Oglah. He was a student in the trades at the Regional Technical Center, and Weirs hired him immediately out of high school as an apprentice.

"His work ethic came from home, but his passion for the job came from school," said Zuke. "They come out of there and they have an interest and a base with a little bit of technical sense, but then they need to be fully trained. We need more kids coming out of the school like him."

SRTC Director Kathy Sargent said they need more supporters like Weirs. Technical equipment and real industry supplies come at a huge cost, and that's why donors are key to the program's success.



Weirs Buick GMC in Arundel hired Sanford High School graduate Amer Oglah last summer to be an apprentice because of his training from the Regional Technical Center.



Weir Dealer Principal and Owner Linda Zuke and Collision Center Manager Bob Bernard are strong supporters of the trades offered at Sanford Regional Technical Center.

"We are extremely grateful for our partnership with Weirs, which has not only resulted in the valuable sponsorship of two SRTC programs, but also in employment opportunities for our students," said Sargent. "Businesses such as Weirs understand the importance of providing cutting-edge equipment and education to students so that they can become our much-needed workforce of the future."

Bernard said the 18-year-old arrived with tremendous drive and a strong work ethic.

"It's really refreshing to get someone who's so excited about learning the trades; he's got a passion for his work," said Bernard. "We need to let kids know these options are available."

Bernard, who originally went the college

route as a teen only to land himself in tremendous student debt, is also passionate about driving kids into a promising career. "It's an industry where they can write their own ticket. It's a great paying job, and it's not just "a job" either. I've told him if you stay in the industry, you'll have a job forever."

The time is right for the next generation, too. "We need to get kids interested in the trades, now," said Zuke, "because there is an older population right now, with nobody to replace them. Median age at Weirs is upper 40s, and who will replace them when they retire?"

"I have to do something to encourage kids to think about the trades. This is a start, but I don't think it's enough."

That's where teachers step in, such as Jason Brown who was instrumental in piquing Oglah's interest in auto-body work, particularly painting.

"As an instructor I really appreciate Weirs and their generosity and genuine interest in the trades and specifically the Auto Collision program here at SRTC," said Brown. "The connection made with Bob in the Weirs body shop through student hires has been a very positive experience for both the students and myself, and I look forward to continuing this in the future. Thank you to all of the Weirs staff for making this happen."