

Apprentices Thrive in Manufacturing



***Nikki Miller, Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley
Operations Apprentice***

Nicole DeFuso and Nikki Miller are changing the course of their careers while learning valuable skills.

DeFuso and Miller are apprentices at the Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley Operations in Macungie, Pa. Employing about 2,700 people, the facility produces heavy-duty trucks for the North American market and for export outside the United States.

“This has been an incredible opportunity, and I’m glad I was part of it,” said Miller, who has been in the electrical apprenticeship for more than two years.

The company and the United Auto Workers Local 677 started the apprenticeship program in 2001 and oversee it through a Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee. The facility offers apprenticeships in four skilled trades: electrical, millwright, layout (tool & die), and welding. Plans are in motion to add a fifth occupation.

JFF and its partner, Keystone Development Partnership, provided financial support to the program in 2021 through the [IDEA-M](#) project. The funding helped offset the cost of the related training instruction, offered through Lehigh Carbon Community College.

Nicole DeFuso began working at the plant in 2005 after deciding college wasn't for her. Both of her parents worked at the plant, so she was familiar with manufacturing and with the facility itself. She was working in the plant's paint department when she was encouraged to take the test for the apprenticeship program.

DeFuso chose to do an apprenticeship in the layout (tool & die) department, an area that interested her because of the emphasis on design. She's been in the program for about two years, learning new skills under the guidance of experienced mentors.

"Everyone in the shop has been really helpful," she said. "I know there aren't a lot of women in this field, and that did worry me a little bit. But I don't feel like they are treating me any differently."



***Nicole DeFuso, Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley
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DeFuso has taken most of the required classes at Lehigh Carbon Community College. She plans to continue taking classes until she has earned her associate degree.

Nikki Miller went to work at the Mack Trucks plant in 2004 after being laid off from another job. Like DeFuso, she was familiar with the plant because her father worked there.

She chose the electrical apprenticeship because she has a background in design and drafting.

She tracks her on-the-job training on a chart, and it's clear she's making progress. She's able to work independently on projects, including rewiring 50 "tuggers," the machines that pull materials around the plant.

"Don't get me wrong -- I have a ways to go," she said. "But I'm always learning."

Like DeFuso, Miller said the journeyworkers who serve as her mentors are supportive and helpful. Their top priority is safety, Miller and DeFuso said.

Over the years, the apprenticeship program has faced administrative challenges and budget constraints. Through the combined efforts of the company and the United Autoworkers, it's now on track.

Thomas Gombos, Maintenance Manager at Mack Trucks Lehigh Valley Operations, said the program offers the company a way to provide both general skills training and training customized to the facility's equipment.

"Through customized training our apprentices build their skill sets working directly with our equipment, enabling them to become very efficient in supporting the Mack Trucks manufacturing facility as they progress through and complete the program," he said.

Bruce Miller, a District V Committee Person for the United Auto Workers Local 677, helps to coordinate the program.

Through this registered apprenticeship program, the facility meets the critical need for skilled labor, he said. When those positions are filled internally, then the company avoids using contract labor, he said.

"Now the apprentices can walk through and say, 'I did that,' Miller said. "There's a lot of pride and a sense of ownership. It's an investment in everyone's future. It's a good thing."