

DEGREE to SUCCESS

By Tom Schuman

Making Dreams Come True

Does Ivy Tech Community College's Achieve Your Degree (AYD) program truly benefit employers and their associates?

Nancy Sobeck, senior manager of training and development with Madison Precision Products (MPP), recalls shopping in the produce aisle at the local Walmart. Wearing her work uniform, she was approached with the following plea:

"How do I get on over there?" was the question. "My husband works there. The deal was I was going to get to go to school first. But you guys have such a cool program, now he's in. So I think I'll just come to work over there so I can go to school too."

How about the employees going back to continue their education? Yalande Chester-Pullom has worked in a variety of roles since

joining Old National Bank (ONB) in Evansville in 2002. She is currently seeking her degree in business administration.

"Taking these courses made me realize I have so much more inside me that I can get out and share with others – and build my network," shares Chester-Pullom, citing the encouragement from all who have assisted her. "If you had told me back in 2016 when I started that I would be here, I never would have believed it."

And she notes the extra motivation from family to continue to do well in her classes.

"As my second grandbaby turned 1 (year old), I was told I could no longer babysit because my grades were dropping. So I don't get to see my grandbabies unless my homework is done. You better believe my homework is done."

Early adopters

ONB was the first company to partner with Ivy Tech on the initiative. Chris Lowery, senior vice president of workforce strategy for the community college, credits Bob Jones, retiring later this year as bank CEO, for being the catalyst.

Kenda Vanzo, executive vice president of associate engagement and integration for ONB, recalls the excitement as the initiative began. She admits, however, "I was a little skeptical about whether it would



Yalande Chester-Pullom, at home with her grandchildren and at work at Old National Bank, has an extra incentive to continue doing well in school.

really change the numbers. What would be different (from the traditional tuition reimbursement program already in place)?

“It really got a huge response in terms of interest.”

As in 139 students enrolled in one form or another over the last three-plus years. Vanzo says about half are in Evansville with others from different parts of the state, including some participating online from outside Indiana.

Lowery offers some of the reasons why AYD has made a difference for Old National and other organizations.

“We provide a concierge service, go to the place of business, work with individual employees. We look at what areas of study

they perform or whether it is just something that gives them pride and helps them on their path forward,” she attests, “I think that benefits Old National greatly because we’re investing in people and people feel like they’re getting benefit from that.”

Fulfilling dreams

At MPP, Achieve Your Degree has been rebranded as Achieve Your Dream. It is paired with additional internal technical training, along with leadership and management programs.

Kevin Turner, vice president of facilities and director, credits establishing the training and development division as critical for the manufacturer of aluminum die cast

Because we had that conversation (about achieving your dream), that’s what she was passionate about.”

Chaney is that associate. She had been at the company for five years, first in the quality department and then in maintenance.

“I was very surprised, not that I thought he would be overly upset. But to invest the time and money in somebody like that and have them say I changed my mind, I thought I was going to get a different reaction than what I did,” she recalls. “I told him there were so many people in the automation robotics program that I felt like I didn’t want to be just one of the group. I wanted to stand out and do my own thing. I was pleasantly surprised when he was happy about that.”

Chaney reiterates the support from both her employer and Ivy Tech. “They made it very easy and they take on the financial burden. You just have to concentrate on your grades. It just makes it so much easier. Plus, you feel like the company has your back a little more.”

Impacting lives

Chaney says she has much to be thankful for, having earlier spent three and a half years in prison.

“I did everything in my power to change my way of thinking, to change my habits,” she reflects. “This program is an opportunity for a lot of people who wouldn’t otherwise be able to attend college to achieve something a little more. I appreciate that. I really do.”

Canoy has worked in maintenance for nearly three years after coming to the United States from the Philippines. He was planning to save money to go to school, but AYD accelerated his timetable. Like Chaney, he looks to continue on to earn a four-year degree.

“It’s helped me a lot because I didn’t really have much experience,” Canoy shares. “What I learned in class, I have used at work; some of the (content in) class I already know because of what I have done on the job.”

Business boost

Ivy Tech President Sue Ellspermann says, “Employers want to retain good employees. They want to move them up. This provides them a much better tool to do that with their employees. You don’t have to be a big company to do it.”

MPP has 6% of its associates (one of the highest totals of any company) engaged in AYD, with more than half on the Dean’s List. Sobeck, who spent 15 years at MPP and eight as a senior corporate trainer at Ivy Tech before returning to the company, emphasizes that “people tell me they feel hopeful. Many



Tracey Chaney of Madison Precision Products was able to switch her course of study to help “achieve her dream.”

that might be important to them (both employer and employee),” he explains. “We look at curriculum and financial aid. We then got rid of one of the biggest hitches to tuition reimbursement as people often don’t have the cash flow to pay upfront. We just aggregate the bill for you and send it (to the employer) at the end of the semester.”

Chester-Pullom, along with associates/students Tracey Chaney and Gil Canoy at MPP, confirms that the financial arrangement made her return to school possible. She says she always wanted to continue her education. The support at ONB was also essential, with flexible work arrangements allowing her to initially make up her time while taking some classes during the day.

Vanzo reports 35 team members have received one form of a certificate or another and five have earned associate degrees.

“Whether the knowledge they gain in this program is directly applicable to the jobs

automotive products.

Because all involvement is voluntary, “One thing I use this for is to gauge initiative. We didn’t force anybody into any of these programs. This gives me a tool to use for placement.”

As for the “dream” part of the equation, Sobeck contends, “I can dream all day long for you – and I’ve been known to do that – and push you really hard, but if we ask what is it you really want to do, which this program does, there’s a lot of buy-in from the associates. Our company is really big on find your passion and let’s help you achieve that dream.”

Turner has seen that dream play out several times. One involves an associate in die maintenance who was studying at Ivy Tech in automation robotics.

“She came into my office with tears in her eyes saying, ‘You’re not going to like this, but I want to change my degree to information technology.’ I was so happy.

of the people I talk with have the desire to do more, be more. That's what I feel this program has done."

The company representatives, when asked what guidance they would provide to others, don't hesitate in their responses.

"They have to reflect on how they have approached human development in the past and whether it has worked or not," Turner asserts. "I felt our training, up to that point (of developing the new division) was largely something we did as a theme every year on our business plan. In the past, when a crisis occurred, we would have reduced the training."

Vanzo of ONB delivers this perspective.

"I think I would start with having an open mind. As business people, we tend to be expense conscious. Sometimes your first consideration is how much is this going to cost and can we afford it.

"Ivy Tech really works with the organization and the students to identify opportunities for financial aid and assistance



Gil Canoy attends school following his third-shift work at Madison Precision Products.

to minimize the expense back to the employer," she adds. "At the end of the day, you end up with a really great benefit to offer associates who want to invest in themselves

and learn and grow, with a lot less cost than you might think. Understand that the benefits of the program are going to far outweigh the costs to the company."

RESOURCES: Kendra Vanzo and Yalande Chester-Pullom, Old National Bank, at www.oldnational.com | Kevin Turner, Nancy Sobeck, Tracey Chaney and Gil Canoy, Madison Precision Products, at www.madisonprecision.com | Ivy Tech Community College at www.ivytech.edu/achieveyourdegree

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