

Simi Valley Acorn

2015-10-09 / Schools

Students step into manufacturing

Over 300 county high-schoolers tour local factories

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INQUIRING MINDS—Simi Valley High School senior Martin Santiago, 17, center, asks a question during a tour of the Milgard Windows & Doors manufacturing plant Oct. 2 in Simi Valley. JOAN PAHOYO/Acorn Newspapers

Before beginning their Oct. 2 tour of Milgard Windows & Doors, the students in Simi Valley High School teacher Jeff Lindell's drafting class were told to don long, cloth sleeves that covered their forearms.

They were also given gloves with rubber palms and fingertips, safety glasses for their eyes and, finally, walkie-talkies with headsets to hear tour guide Alex Morales above the din of machinery.

Then, the dozen students, mostly juniors and seniors, passed through the soundproof doors at the Simi Valley factory and, in just a few steps, moved from the theoretical environment of a classroom into the practical world of manufacturing.

"Can everyone hear me?" Morales asked once they were all out on the factory floor. His voice sounded metallic in the earpiece. "Try to stay together, and if anyone has a question, just come up to the front where I am so I can answer you."

Everywhere, workers and machines bustled. Forklifts darted around, picking up and dropping off pallets of parts.

Morales, who at 26 is already in charge of quality control for the 200,000-square-foot plant with 230 employees, pulled the students aside to a quieter spot and offered some straight talk about high school, college and work.

"You know how everyone keeps saying we're still in a recession and no one is hiring?" he said. "Well, companies are now hiring lean manufacturing experts, right out of college. I studied lean manufacturing in college and instantly I had all kinds of job offers."

Morales graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a bachelor's degree in industrial technology.

"I'm only three years out of college," he told the students. "But a lot of my friends who didn't go to college just didn't have the opportunities. It's tough. Without that piece of paper, it's tough out there."

Lindell's students were among more than 300 high-schoolers from around the county who toured the door and window maker and two other companies on National Manufacturing Day last Friday.

Created and supported by manufacturing industry associations, the day is observed on the first Friday in October. Participating companies across the country open their doors to high school and college students as well as the public "to show, in a coordinated effort, what manufacturing is, and what it isn't," according to mfgday.com.

"By working together during and after Manufacturing Day, manufacturers will begin to address the skilled labor shortage they face, connect with future generations, take charge of the public image of manufacturing and ensure the ongoing prosperity of the whole industry," the website states.

Larissa Hoffman, director of communications for Edge Factor, a media company hired by manufacturing industry associations to promote the day in the U.S., Mexico and Canada, said thousands of companies across California took part in the international event this year.

Locally, trips were sponsored by the Manufacturing Roundtable of Ventura County and the Workforce Development Board of Ventura County and organized in conjunction with the Ventura County Office of Education (VCOE).

While some students visited Milgard in Simi Valley, one of the largest builders of doors and windows on the West Coast, others toured Haas Automation Inc. in Oxnard and Dynamic Automation Inc. in Thousand Oaks, both of which design and manufacture machinery.

"We want to encourage young adults to consider careers in manufacturing," said Alex Rivera, Milgard's human resources manager. "For us here in Simi Valley, it's somewhat personal in that we've got a lot of openings that we struggle to fill. Knowing that there are folks that maybe don't know about our company and don't know about the types of jobs we offer, this is one way to raise that awareness."

Milgard currently has 74 job openings in a range of positions, he said, from \$10.50-an-hour factory line jobs, to higher-paying positions in sales, engineering, design and production—the full gamut of manufacturing, Rivera said.

Lindell said the trip allowed his students "to make the connection between what they do in a classroom and what (people) do in an actual business."

"Most kids don't know what it's like in the real working world," he added.

Lindell's students are currently learning drafting by hand. Later in the semester they'll move on to computer-assisted drafting.

Morales told the students he didn't get a chance to take those two classes until his sophomore year

in college.

“Here’s a job I want you guys to look up at home: continuous improvement manager,” Morales said as the tour concluded. “That has to do with the whole lean manufacturing concept of making things faster, cheaper, with less parts, and more efficiently. If you’re interested in manufacturing, that’s the job title you want to look into.”

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