Youth Recruitment
Toronto's Adds to Drywall Training Center, and Hopes to Add to the Work Force

By Don Procter

Inviting a swarm of politicians, building trades dignitaries and media to the ceremonial opening of the Interior Systems Contractors Association's newly expanded drywall training center has done wonders for the facility's popularity.

"The phones won't stop ringing," explains Candi Colandrea, ISCA's assistant training coordinator. Callers want to know when they can enroll in either the drywall applicator or drywall finishing programs at the fanciful new digs in suburban Toronto.

At a cost of about $3.8 million (all numbers are in Canadian dollars), the expanded facility was opened for business last July. But the ceremonial ribbon-cutting event came seven months later, with Ontario's Economic Development and Trade Minister Bob Runciman handling the scissors. "Certainly it'll mean construction will be stronger because of the key role that skilled interior building workers have on the industry's success," Runciman told a crowd of visitors at the center.

The addition increases the size of ISCA's complex by 8,000 square feet, bringing the total square footage to 20,000. Another 10,000 square feet of outdoor space was added for hands-on home building instruction. The additional training space takes pressure off the now crammed center by doubling the teaching capacity from 120 to 240 apprentices annually. That's great news for many people on the enrollment waiting list.

"The media coverage on the event has really got the message out," Colandrea says. The standing joke is that if the phones keep ringing, the drywallers' association will have to start drawing up blueprints for another addition. "The problem is we don't have any more land; we'd have to develop the parking lot," she quips.

Hugh Laird, executive director of ISCA, says the best thing about the ribbon-cutting event, which included speeches by some of the industry's statesmen and a food feast fit for a fine wedding, was that it
gave the many provincial politicians attending an opportunity to tour the training center. “It opened their eyes to what we are doing,” Laird said.

**Strong Curriculum**

The training center runs drywall applicator and finisher programs twice annually, plus two advanced courses. Each course is eight weeks long. Two full-time, two part-time and assistant training coordinator Colandrea were hired to handle the extra teaching load.

The bigger facility also offers a number of upgrading courses for 600 tradepeople along with an eight-week EIF systems applicator course. Hands-on learning plays a big part in the curriculum with EIF systems being applied by students to houses built on the grounds, while steel stud modules present learning opportunities for EIFS students inside. Laird adds that plans are under way to make space at the complex for a course on asbestos abatement.

“With the expansion in place we believe this is the best such facility in North America,” Adolph Gust, president of ISCA, told a packed meeting room at the ribbon-cutting event. Along with funding assistance from the provincial government’s Strategic Skills Investment Program, ISCA built the project in cooperation with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local 675, the International Brotherhood of Painters & Allied Trades Local 1891, and the Acoustical Association of Ontario. Union agents, manufacturers and suppliers contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in materials and labor.

Colandrea was hired last July to assist with the design and development of classes within the two eight-week programs offered. They are the Drywall Finisher and Plasterer program and the Drywall Acoustic Mechanic and Lather program, which is geared to drywall apprentices. The latter course curriculum covers boarding, framing, steel studs, blueprint reading, handling procedures of hazardous materials, scaffolding and computer and manual estimating. About 60 to 65 percent of the program is practical.

Working safely is the top priority in instruction at ISCA, explains instructor Steve Ellis. Along with proper usage of
tools, students are required to pass first aid courses, including one on CPR.

After passing the eight-week course, students put in at least 3,000 hours on the job before returning to class for the eight-week advanced course. Classes cover more complex installation techniques, including moveable wall and accessible floor systems designed for state-of-the-art office buildings.

After successful completion of the course, students clock another 2,400 hours on the job, then take exams for a journeyman certificate, which entitles them to top dollar and the freedom to work in any province in Canada.

Recruitment Challenges

Colandrea says students enrolled in ISCA courses range in age from 16 to mid 40s. But the average age of visitors attending a recent open house at the center was 32. That number is significant in that ISCA and other building associations throughout the Greater Toronto Area have been striving to recruit younger students.

The average age of first-year apprentices in the city’s building industry is a whopping 28. People like Laird would like to see that number drop by eight to 10 years. To accomplish that, the association has developed a variety of recruitment approaches, including talks by ISCA representatives at career days in high schools around the city.

It has been an uphill sales job, however, because societal pressures steer most young people down academic paths to university and community college. And that has created labor shortages that are bound to grow as the current work force nears retirement.

Vern Zapfe, chairman of the training center and president of Four Seasons Drywall, a major contractor in Greater Toronto, praises the association’s efforts to get the message out to guidance coun-
Youri Darichuk (left) and Myhailo Loboiko level steel stud frame as part of a school project at ISCA’s drywall and framing program.

Ellis recalls a time when many tradespeople had relatives in the industry. It was considered good, honest work, and fathers were proud to see their sons take pride in their trade. But today’s older generation discourages their children from taking careers in construction. “You rarely see a son and father in the trade now,” Ellis explains. “They tell them to go get a better education; don’t do what they did.”

Since he started teaching at ISCA in 1993, he’s noticed that younger people are coming through the front door for an education. They are a brighter lot than the young tradespeople Ellis hung with in his youth. “They are easier to train because they come in here better educated,” he says.

To make a case for a career in the drywall trades, ISCA argues that many young people choosing university over a trade end up weighed down by a huge debt. Those graduating with a bachelor of arts degree, according to statistics, land jobs only paying around $30,000. Many of them don’t even make that much, only able to find work in minimum wage jobs (about $7 an hour). Graduating drywall students, however, won’t be faced with huge tuition debts, and they land piece-work jobs paying $28 to $32 an hour, plus benefits. Well-established drywall applicators or finishers can easily make $55,000 annually, Laird adds.

From a recruitment perspective, Colandrea’s role is to attend a range of events, including school fairs and trade shows. “What really hits home with the kids is our (recruitment) video,” she says. It is an overview of the construction of the Air Canada Centre (home to Toronto’s professional hockey and basketball teams). The video features interviews...
with professional athletes that the teens identify with. “The idea is to get the kids attention and the video seems to do that,” she says.

Another successful marketing ploy is the two 30-second advertisements ISCA runs on live television broadcasts of Toronto Maple Leaf games on Saturday’s Hockey Night in Canada, a long-standing tradition with much of the younger male population of the nation. “The response has been fantastic,” Laird points out.

Construction Challenges

The newly expanded training center was completed with the assistance of a $1.22 million grant from the provincial government through the Strategic Skills Investment Program. Laird says after four years of trying to get government help, he was “pleased as punch” when the grant was finally awarded just over a year ago.

For the construction of the new wing, the original plan was to use student labor, but the idea was abandoned because coordinating construction around class time proved to be a scheduling nightmare. ISCA did get assistance from unions that support the center, however, “and we got hundreds of thousands of dollars from suppliers for building materials,” he adds. The cinder-block addition is clad in EIFS.

But the association’s efforts to get government assistance don’t stop there. Laird is applying to the federal government for funding to put a study group together to develop a training curriculum for mold remediation. The group would be comprised of hospital and school board administrators as well as environmental contractors that normally remove toxic mold. His objective is to have a course running by year’s end.

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada. He also is the author of this magazine’s Up North column. He will report any further developments on this article in his future columns.