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Crash course: Smith Voke lands coveted grant for repair equipment

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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NORTHAMPTON - Gentlemen, start your grant applications.

Having the right tools is vital at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School in Northampton. Seeing a need to fill gaps, school staff, auto body students and area shop owners teamed to find a grant able to cover the cost of new equipment to repair vehicles.

They wrote letters outlining the school's auto body needs and created a program video this fall to submit with their application for the \$50,000 Ultimate Collision Makeover grant from I-CAR Education Foundation.

In the end, Smith Voke didn't win the \$50,000 prize. But it didn't walk away empty-handed. Sterling Autobody Centers reviewed the school's application and selected it as one of four Massachusetts schools to receive a \$5,000 grant this winter.

"It was really worth the effort and time," said Michael Brooks, head of the auto body department. "We'll mostly use the money to update to keep up with today's industry."

Recent interviews in the school's auto body shop revealed that many students plan to continue their collision repair education after graduation or work toward opening their own shops. Nelson Cucuta, a Smith Voke senior from Easthampton, said his short-term goal is to work full-time after school at Tony's Auto Builders in Westhampton, where he is employed, until he can own his own business.

"I guess that's what every kid out of here wants," Cucuta said. "You make money quick."

Trade schools, however, are struggling to keep up with auto industry standards. The cost of everyday equipment is high, even without the requirements to "go green" by January 2011 with water-based paint booths, spray guns and recyclers.

At Smith Voke, hand and power tools are worn out, a device called a prospotter is needed to weld car parts and a universal laser measuring system is needed to teach students how to pull a vehicle back to pre-accident condition. Vacuum hoses, air-line hoses and sanders all need to be replaced.

"We could use more modern tools to help us learn before we get jobs," Eric Daley, a junior from Williamsburg, said recently as he patched the floor of a 1964 Chevy Impala in the school's shop.

Daley yelled over the sounds of students operating power tools, sanding metal parts and banging out dents. "I hope to be in this trade for as long as I can," he said.

The auto body department stores about 10 cars a week for student work. Typical jobs include

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Mike Brooks, head of the autobody department, teaches freshman students during their week long academics class.



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changing Northampton police labels to detective decals on cruisers, cutting out rust and welding patches on cars and trucks.

"Most students don't get the technical, hands-on experience you get here," said Robert Holhut, an auto body instructor. He noted that experience is valuable to local business owners, who hire Smith Voke students every year. Shop owners, Holhut said, are "impressed by their knowledge and their work ethic and their willingness to learn."

To that end, Mike Florio, executive director to the school's advisory board, said Voke auto body students are "pretty versatile." There are about 30 students in the department.

Meanwhile, Jesse Marhefka and Seth Thibodeau welded new supports for the radiator of a Ford Escort. The car's front end had been wrecked in a crash.

"We're trying to learn the right way here so that way we don't go out and make mistakes when we're in a real shop," said Marhefka, a senior from Easthampton.

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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