

Y-12's Training and Technology instructor's story – Evelyn Watson

As I have researched the history of the Training and Technology (TAT) program conducted jointly by the Oak Ridge Associated Universities and Union Carbide Corporation, Nuclear Division, with support from the Department of Energy and predecessor agencies, I have found several instructors who have exceptional recall about those "good ole days." Several trainees are also still in the area and their memories are rich as well. So, let's look at one of the instructor's recollections about TAT.

This is Evelyn Watson's story about TAT. Evelyn is a scientist who retired from Oak Ridge Associated Universities in 1994 and who worked her way up from an entry level Record Clerk position to the director of the ORAU Radiation Internal Dose Information Center. She served as chair of the Society of Nuclear Medicine's Medical Internal Radiation Dose Committee for several years.

Evelyn is a good friend and agreed to share her story with us. She and my wife worked together for years.

Evelyn says, "I taught 1/2 time for one year (I think FY 1970). I taught math and introductory physics to people learning to handle radioactive sources, particularly use radioactive sources to check seams in tanks, etc., for leaks."

"My other students were studying drafting. I taught them math and English grammar. But the primary courses were the physical testing program.

"Other TAT programs were machining, welding, mechanical operations and drafting. The equipment used for training was primarily Y-12 surplus items and the skills instructors were Y-12 employees.

"Teaching in the TAT program was a joy. The students had a desire to have a better life, so they responded positively to the training. I had people from Appalachia (farmers, former miners, etc.), and people from ghettos in Chattanooga and in Chicago. Somewhere there should be records of the increase in income that resulted from the TAT program. I know this was periodically made available.

"Many of the students had no experience with handling money. They had no ideas about banks, savings accounts, writing checks. The instructors worked with them about that.

"Some were illiterate and had to be taught how to read and write. Others got their GED while in the program.

"Sometime after I worked at TAT, they brought in migrant workers to learn skills. I don't know much about that period.

"One sad story concerned a young trainee who was doing so well. One Monday he did not return from a weekend in Chattanooga. He had killed a man who raped his sister. We were all distressed about it, but the end of the story was better. He served time and came back to finish the program.

That concludes Evelyn's perception of her experience at TAT. Even after all these years, her experience there remains fresh in her memory. It was a time of helping young people who came from a wide variety of backgrounds and who were striving for an improved life.

The TAT program obviously was one that created a sense of accomplishment by all who were a part of the 17 year effort. Because of that program, many individuals were helped and careers were formed that have lasted to this day.

Bill Hodge, Y-12 employee in the Product Certification Organization, has been most helpful in providing information and contacts. Bill went through the program in 1977 and was hired on a job in Decatur, Alabama. When that job played out in 1979, he was hired at Y-12, where he has been ever since.

Upon coming to work at Y-12, Bill was assigned as an instructor at the TAT program while his clearance was coming through. He continued there for about 18 months. His recollections of the program include some unusual and somewhat amusing events in hindsight.

Such things as a stabbing right outside the gate to Y-12, a fist fight between two trainees that had to be broken up by the security police and an instructor, a dead rat, killed by a trainee, being placed in the purse of an unpopular female student.

Bill said, "You just wouldn't believe some of the 'costumes' female students would wear. There was even one female trainee who was known as 'Boots' because she wore knee-length boots and just dressed provocatively in general. She managed to get married and divorced twice during the six-month training cycle."

The instructors and other trainees often attached nicknames to trainees, such as "Boots" as mentioned above and "Cowboy." One trainee insisted on wearing his cowboy hat in class, which was against the rules. He almost got terminated because he refused to follow that rule. Bill said, "'Cowboy' was hit in the face with a glass tea pitcher by his wife for making a pass at her sister. I asked him why he didn't block her or duck and he said he was more worried about the butcher knife she was wielding in the other hand."

Then there was the female trainee nicknamed "Spacey Tracey," who was just one of the "wildest girls anyone had ever met!" according to Bill. Obviously there were some characters among the thousands of trainees who went through the TAT at Y-12.

With many of the trainees coming from inner city situations in places like Chicago and other large cities, they must have brought some most unusual outlooks on life developed by their years in the inner city environment. Coming to a small city in the middle of Appalachia was a culture shock not only for the trainees but also for the instructors and other trainees from other parts of the nation. A boiling pot of cultures for sure!

Yet TAT turned out exceptionally well-trained graduates who were hired at a rate of over 90% of them being placed in well-paying jobs. So, of the more than 6,000 graduates, a huge number of them turned out well and had opportunities for careers that would never have been theirs without TAT.

I continue to appreciate all the positive feedback on these articles on TAT. More testimonials will be forthcoming and there is room for yours. Let me know about your experience.

Contact D. Ray Smith at (865) 482-4224.