

Y-12's Training and Technology – “A Design for Success”

Thanks to Terry Barnes, a former TAT trainee and later an instructor there, I have just gotten to view a 22-minute film created in 1976 featuring the success of the TAT program at Y-12 up to that time. It was a refreshing view of optimism, excitement and reflective of a time at Y-12 when something so new and different was being experienced by those individuals who were conducting the TAT program as well as the trainees. It was fun to watch!

The film begins by showing some of the trainees coming into Y-12 through Post 5, the main entrance to Y-12 that is just across the road from the New Hope Cemetery. This historic and still active cemetery is only remaining element of the small community that was here in Bear Creek Valley before the Manhattan Project. To me that cemetery remains a symbol of a slower time, a more tranquil and relaxed atmosphere, and an element of our past that reminds all who pass by that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

The trainees coming in the gate and passing the camera were all smiles. Many of the young men had sideburns well down their cheeks and there was lots of polyester clothing on the young ladies. One young lady, a blonde with a strong and purposeful stride, I readily recognized as a young “Janice” who still works at Y-12 and who I hope will share her story with us soon.

The story on film begins by describing the origins of the Training and Technology efforts in 1966 when the Department of Labor had joined with the Atomic Energy Commission, Oak Ridge Associated Universities and Union Carbide Nuclear Division to locate a special experiment in learning at the Y-12 Plant. A photo of the first graduating class is exhibited. There were no ladies, all graduates were men. This would soon change.

The experiment lasted until 1968, according to the film's narration, when it was declared a highly successful experiment and launched as an ongoing training program. The movie then cites the statistics of the program to date in 1976 as having graduated over 3,500 trainees with well over 90 percent successful job placement.

The resulting jobs averaged an increase in wages that literally doubled the graduate's salary when compared to what they were making before TAT. The narrator explains that many of the graduates were now making in excess of \$10,000 a year! Think back to the 1960's and 1970's when you compare wages.

An interview with the president of one of the local industries who had hired four of the graduates, one of whom he had already promoted to assistant foreman, showed that he was eager to bring more of the TAT graduates into his company. This example was but one of many cited as successful job placements.

At a cost to the government of \$2,640 per student per course, the narrator stated that within three years the money invested by the government in the training program is returned by providing skilled jobs that resulted in increased income tax payments. See why the film makers felt they had a huge success story in TAT.

Other aspects of the unusual and ground breaking TAT program was that by 1976 the percentage of female trainees had risen to 13 percent. The percentage of minorities of all types had increased substantially.

In 1972 and again in 1975 a work release program had been established with local prisons that enabled model prisoners to attend TAT. I have been told of one instructor who went by the local jail each morning and picked up a trainee and then returned him to jail in the evenings. Yet another example of the relationships built between instructors and trainees.

A program was created whereby local high school seniors could participate in the training as well. I have been promised a story by one of these individuals who is still working at Y-12. He proudly states that he got an excellent opportunity at TAT, while a senior in high school at Oak Ridge High School.

The TAT even took in some migrant and seasonal workers and gave them skills training. The trainees were coming from literally all walks of life and TAT was a melting pot of people from all over the nation, especially the northeast, being brought to East Tennessee and given a boost like they had never expected. A high percentage of them stayed and have had successful careers here.

The film continues to describe the actual training and to show examples of classroom activities and shop work. One of the scenes shows an instructor writing on a chalk board and teaching a class and others show the machine shops and welding shops. The actual training consisted of 30 % of the time in a classroom and 70% of the training done in the hands-on workshop environment.

Many of the trainees had less than eighth grade education when arriving at TAT. GED classes and remedial learning programs were included to help get them to a high school equivalency.

Journeyman from Atomic Trades and Labor Council were many of the instructors and Bob Kyle, then president of ATLC describes near the conclusion of the film how the union fully supported TAT. An example he uses is to state that even during a strike at the plant in 1970, TAT instructors were allowed to cross the picket line to keep from interrupting the training program.

The film "A Design for Success" does a good job of documenting this highly successful program and promotes it as a model that could be replicated throughout the nation. The story of how TAT, obviously a success, led to other training programs and initiatives that ultimately led to TAT being stopped is one that even to this day is filled with mixed emotions.