

## **Y-12 apprentices and instructors speak up**

In doing the research into the current Y-12 Apprentice Program, I found a level of enthusiasm that caused me to pause and reflect on the importance of this time in the life of Y-12's workforce. I have been at Y-12 long enough to see several phases of the important missions come and noted the response made to prepare the workforce for new requirements, new work arrangements and new skill sets.

In the first apprentice program held in the late 1960's, there was an expansion of Y-12's mission. There were even outreach efforts to attract work from other government agencies. This has been encouraged several times over the history of Y-12, and then the cycle turns and such outreach is no longer encouraged; it is even frowned upon for awhile before returning in a few years.

I have decided that this is just the nature of our work and the direct relationship it bears to the political process. Eventually, regardless of the political changes, the potential that exists at Y-12 is realized, resulting in greater use of the skills and abilities of our workforce and the "Can Do" attitude, as well as the tremendous capability for precise manufacturing and measurement.

Yet, these cycles over the years have often created situations where early retirements and reductions in force have caused measures to have to be taken to offset the potential negative impact of such realities on our ability to maintain a stable skilled workforce. Apprentice programs have played a huge role over the years in keeping a skilled workforce at Y-12 in times of what might otherwise be drastic swings in skill levels.

Like the Training and Technology program, these apprentice programs over the years have been excellent training programs. Those who participated in them have often spoke highly of the value received from the training and the relationships developed that tend to last throughout their careers.

Often the instructors are as passionate about the program as are the apprentices. They see firsthand what tremendously positive results occur when people apply themselves to learning a skill and are helped in that endeavor by an experienced journeyman. It is a relationship thing that goes back to the earliest of times when skills were handed down through the generations using this approach.

The present program is no different. I asked a few of the apprentices and instructors to comment on their experiences. Here are some of their answers:

"The reward to me as an instructor is getting to work with the apprentices on a daily basis and seeing them put into practice what they have learned in the classroom."

"The Y-12 Apprentice Program not only teaches the apprentices to become good journeymen, but also to realize the importance Y-12 plays in the bigger world."

"I think the work we do at Y-12 is very important, and the maintenance group is important to the overall mission of Y-12. This program is successful because of the Atomic Trades and Labor Council and Y-12 management's relationship."

"The most important part of this program is the passing on of knowledge. Because of the aging Y-12 workforce, we need to pass on skills to the future generations."

"I am a product of a previous Y-12 apprentice program. I started in 1978 and finished in 1982. I'm grateful for the opportunity I have been given. If I hadn't [completed the apprentice program,] I wouldn't have had the opportunity to get the education and on-the-job- training I've gotten here." This person is now an instructor in the present program . . . giving back to others as he was once given to.

"We rotate from crew to crew so we can build a diverse skill set, and when we finish, we have opportunities to work in various places. From fiber optics, to calibrating instruments, to fire protection . . . it varies so much."

"I definitely want to continue at Y-12 as a journeyman electrician. For an electrician, Y-12 offers stability and security that other electrical careers don't have . . . no traveling and much more job security."

"I've learned how to work really well with a wide variety of people. In this position, we move from shop to shop and constantly meet new people, and this has helped me learn how to work with all kinds of people."

And finally, this quote may sum it all up for the apprentices: "With no prior electrician experience, it has all been a huge learning experience. Mainly I've learned a lot about myself. Beforehand, I never thought I could do something like this. It's boosted my confidence in myself, and it's made me see I can do anything I put my mind to."

See what I mean? These quotes from instructors and apprentices give fair testimony to the results obtained and the benefits derived from the Y-12 Apprentice Program. And those benefits are as many and varied as the people who go through the program. The benefits exist for both union and management.

One of the more important aspects of this most recent apprentice program seems to me to be the determination by both the ATLC and the management of Y-12 to keep it going. The long-term potential of sustaining the effort can result in a workforce that retains a high skill level and can more readily face the challenges of new missions that may come to Y-12 in the future.

The Y-12 Apprentice Program is a success by any measure. It is yet another example of Y-12's learning from its past and improving on a fine legacy of others without losing the best aspects of the previous experience. We at Y-12 can be proud of this program and the excellent workers being provided to the current workload and to future missions.