

Heavy equipment operator instructor has construction in her DNA

31 December 2019 by CONEXPO-CON/AGG

When Dawson Vanderwiele walks into a heavy equipment operator training class in Baker Technical Institute in Baker City, Ore., not many students suspect that she's the instructor. After all, construction is still a male-dominated industry and at 19, Dawson is younger than many of the students in the classroom. But that hasn't stopped Vanderwiele from teaching what she knows well – how to operate heavy equipment.

"A lot of times I have to prove that I know what I am doing, that I know what I am telling them and what they need to be doing," says Vanderwiele.

GROWING UP AROUND HEAVY EQUIPMENT

What the students may not understand is that Vanderwiele has grown up around heavy equipment. Her father, uncle and grandfather own Triple C Redi-Mix in Baker City, Ore. Her father's house stands on one end of the property, her grandfather's house stands on the other, and the business stands between them. Before kindergarten, while most kids her age were being driven around in their parents' car to fall asleep, Dawson says she spent her nap times in a backhoe.

According to her father Casey Vanderwiele, his kids always had a lot of curiosity about the business. "From the time they could walk or talk, Dawson and her younger sister would watch the operation and want to know why somebody was doing something the way they were doing it," he says.

Dawson's first recollection of operating equipment was at her 10th birthday, when she hopped up on an excavator to pile up some brush. Since then, she's been operating the company's equipment and truck fleet when needed by the family business. The company owns Hitachi, Case, Caterpillar and Komatsu machines along with a fleet of 20 Mack trucks. Triple C Redi-Mix offers ready-mix, gravel and excavation services to local contractors, government agencies, businesses and homeowners in the Baker, Ore. area.

"She's pretty handy if you need somebody," says the elder Vanderwiele, about Dawson.

BECOMING THE YOUNGEST (AND FIRST FEMALE) CAT SIMULATOR INSTRUCTOR

Baker Technical Institute (BTI), a career training school in Baker City, reached out to Casey Vanderwiele to teach a new heavy equipment operator training program. The program provides instruction on operating heavy equipment in the field at their land lab and in a state-of-the-art learning environment with CAT Simulators. The curriculum, from Caterpillar and the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) incorporates hands-on, simulated jobsite training.

Classes are offered to adults throughout the region and also high school students in the building attached to the local high school. When the commitment turned out to be more than a few hours a month, Casey suggested his daughter (a junior in high school at the time) take on the role. In 2017, she became the youngest and first female to be trained as a Caterpillar Simulator instructor.

"Equipment was part of her DNA," says BTI president Doug Dalton, who hired Dawson. "She showed maturity beyond her years and really took to the concept of how we were teaching the program."

"In my senior year I spent mornings attending my core classes and in the afternoon I worked in the sim room," says Vanderwiele. Now a sophomore at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton, Ore., she continues to work in the BTI mobile training center. The unit allows the school to bring equipment operator training to various community organizations, schools and industry locations.

TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION OF EQUIPMENT OPERATORS

With projected demand for equipment operators exceeding other trades and no other training available it's not surprising the heavy equipment operator training program at BTI has been successful. According to Dalton the program is now graduating approximately 10 students per month with Level 1 or Level 2 operator training.

Before they launched the program, the school reached out to industry to determine the best way to teach heavy equipment operating skills. They quickly learned how mixing in some simulation can greatly increase the learning pace. In addition to being safer and more cost-efficient, Dalton believes the simulator training is also more effective than live training. "On a simulator so many things may be monitored electronically," says Dalton. "That makes the operator aware of the parameters and builds mental awareness around those standards. An instructor can't possibly monitor all those parameters, so students learn twice as fast on the simulator. When we move students to the land lab to run real equipment we can easily see what the simulation benefits have been."

According to Dalton, a good instructor works well in both the classroom simulation and the field and makes learning relevant and career-connected for the student. They have to understand individual barriers to learning and how to accommodate students to improve their performance. Each class trains on motor grader, excavator, dozer and wheel loader simulators and then runs various forms of the same heavy highway equipment at the land lab.

"We want to see more people that have been traditionally underserved get the training," says Dalton. "Having a female instructor is invaluable. We want to remove as many barriers as possible and show people what's possible."

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE

Dawson Vanderwiele not only teaches operating skills, but also tries to prepare students for the workforce. She uses a **CONEXPO/CONAGG podcast** with Missy Scherber and Ryan Goodfellow from Rock Structures to bring real world experience into teacher-student conversations about employment.

"Some students think they are going to walk out of the classroom into a job operating heavy equipment with a 120-hour certificate," she says. "They need to realize that they may be learning how to run equipment but it takes time to become an operator on a site. You have to do the groundwork."

"I tell them, 'you have to want to do it,'" adds Casey Vanderwiele. "If you have a little bit of pride and care you can go to the end of the world as an operator."

Beyond getting her degree in business, Vanderwiele isn't certain what's next, but for now, three generations of the family plan to connect with industry colleagues at CONEXPO-CON/AGG, held March 10-14, 2020 in Las Vegas. According to Casey Vanderwiele, it's been a tradition the family has rarely missed since 1989. This year, Casey will be focused on exploring machines they use daily and is especially looking forward to checking out the new Hitachi wheel loader and mobile jaw crushers.

To learn more about what you can see and do at the show, visit <https://www.conexpoconagg.com/visit/what-to-see/>.

Source: CONEXPO-CON/AGG