

A SPOTLIGHT ON
MANUFACTURING

RECOGNIZING MCKENZIE'S LEADERS IN MANUFACTURING
ALLEGION, HAVEN STEEL, MCKENZIE VALVE, POTTERY DIRECT, PLASTIC
PRODUCT FORMERS, PROFILE METAL, CMC, STANLEY BLACK & DECKER,
J&J AUTO RACING, POLYKEM MATERIALS AND CACHENGO

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Businesses Learn About AI, Innovation
At Annual Manufacturing Breakfast

BY LYNDSLEY SUMMERS
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Leaders from McKen-
zie-area industries gathered
at Bethel's Vera Low Center
for Student Enrichment Fri-
day, October 10, for the McK-
enzie Chamber of Commerce
and Industrial Development
Board's annual Manufactur-
ing Breakfast, celebrating
Manufacturing Month.

Danny Norman, advanced
manufacturing consultant at
the University of Tennessee's
Center for Industrial Services
and lead for Manufactur-
ing Extension Partnership's
(MEP) National Center for
Advanced Tech Solutions,
was the morning's distin-
guished speaker. Norman
travels to businesses across
the state of Tennessee to
teach manufacturing lead-
ers about cost-efficient ways
to remain innovative and
competitive in their markets.

Norman's presentation,
titled "Building McKenzie
Manufacturers' Advanced
Manufacturing Capabilities"
primarily focused on ways
artificial intelligence (AI) can
bridge the gap between em-
ployee error and machine
error and altogether improve
manufacturing business
systems.

Norman presented several
anecdotes of the recreational
ways people can use AI, like
creating funny photos and
videos, but explained how AI
should be used more specifi-
cally for businesses.

"AI is way, way better and
way more significant than
the image generator that
makes cute bunny rabbit pic-



Above, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board members attended the Manufacturing Breakfast October 10. Photo by Joel Washburn/The Banner Below Left, Guest speaker Danny Norman is photographed with McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board Director Monica Heath and University of Tennessee's Center for Industrial Services Business Development Manager, Manufacturing Extension, Todd Reeves. Below Center, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board Director Monica Heath speaks to breakfast attendees. Below Right, Danny Norman, advanced manufacturing consultant at the University of Tennessee's Center for Industrial Services and lead for Manufacturing Extension Partnership's (MEP) National Center for Advanced Tech Solutions, was the distinguished speaker at McKenzie's Manufacturing Breakfast. Photos by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner



tures," Norman said. "We've
gotta use it and be trained to
use it."

He explained that, by
giving AI generators like
ChatGPT specific instruc-
tions and context, users can
receive very helpful advice
and insights like how to op-
timize employee output with
a short staff. Additionally,
he said AI can be the quick,
cost-efficient answer to prob-
lems rather than purchasing
new and expensive software.

"It's such a bright time to
be in manufacturing," Nor-
man said. With AI tools and
the ability to use smart man-
ufacturing, which Norman
defined as communicating
data through a reliable and
ongoing data structure, com-
panies have advancing op-
portunities for innovation.

Norman concluded his
speech by inviting McKenzie
industries to an AI and man-
ufacturing training session
in Knoxville and said, with

enough interest, he could vis-
it McKenzie again to present
a comprehensive training
course.

McKenzie Chamber of
Commerce and Industrial
Development Board Direc-
tor Monica Heath thanked
Norman for speaking and
thanked attending business-
es for their support.

"None of this work is pos-
sible without us all coming
together," said Heath. "Man-
ufacturing Month is about

celebrating our industries
and our employees, opening
the doors for our students
and showing families the
strong, high-paying careers
we have in McKenzie. It's
about building futures where
businesses thrive, families
remain rooted and the next
generation can see a clear
path forward staying home."

Manufacturing Month
events stretched through-
out the month of October,
with several manufacturing

plant tours and free meals
scheduled for manufacturing
employees.

McKenzie's featured busi-
nesses during Manufacturing
Month were Profile Metal
Forming, PolyKem Materials
Processing, Cachengo, Stan-
ley Black & Decker, J&J Auto
Racing, Pottery Direct, Plas-
tic Product Formers, Com-
mercial Metals, Haven Steel
Products, Centennial Bank,
Allegion and McKenzie Valve
& Machining LLC.

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MFC
MONTH



McKenzie Chamber Members Tour Plastic Product Formers, Pottery Direct

BY LYNDSLEY SUMMERS
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Kicking off Manufacturing Month festivities, the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industry scheduled factory tours at VP Racing's Plastic Product Formers and Pottery Direct Wednesday, October 8.

The morning began with a tour of VP Racing's Plastic Product Formers, led by Operations Manager Patrick Ross. Touring chamber members were Mike Stafford (WTPUD), Joseph Butler (Carroll County Mayor), Chuck Sisson (President, Centennial Bank, McKenzie, IDB board member), Tim McBride (McKenzie City Council), Monica Heath (Executive Director, McKenzie Industrial Development Board and Chamber of Commerce) and Noah McEwen (Centennial Bank, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce board member).

Ross led the group through the screenprinting area, in which David Trotter demonstrated how to use the screenprinting machine to print t-shirts. With a full team, he said he could print 675 shirts per hour. Alone, he can print about 400 shirts per hour.

The tour then moved into the main factory area, where the group watched as machines created five-and-a-half gallon jugs out of tiny plastic pellets. The machines are unique to Plastic Products Formers and make two jugs every 55 seconds.

While inside the factory, the tour group marveled at the inventory of plastic jugs ready to be shipped to



Above, Plastic Product Formers Tour Group: Mike Stafford, Mayor Joseph Butler, Chuck Sisson, Plastic Product Formers Operations Manager Patrick Ross, Tim McBride, Monica Heath and Noah McEwen. Below, Pottery Direct Tour Group: Mayor Joseph Butler, Pottery Direct/Syndicate Grower Direct Plant Manager Nick Davis, Mike Stafford, John Wright, Monica Heath, Noah McEwen and Chuck Sisson. Photos by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner



distributors.

Plastic Products Formers sells their jugs to Rural King, Menards, Tractor Supply Co., Bass Pro Shops, Ace Hardware,

Lowe's, Academy Sports, Summit Racing Equipment, True Value Hardware, Do It Best, AutoZone and Orgill. Customers may also find them on Amazon or TikTok

Shop.

In a raffle drawing, Mike Stafford won a free 5.5-gallon jug. Before leaving, several chamber members also purchased jugs.

Chamber members took a short drive down the road to Pottery Direct for their second tour of the day, led by Nick Davis, plant manager at Pottery

Direct/Syndicate Grower Direct. Touring chamber members at Pottery Direct were Carroll County Mayor Joseph Butler, Mike Stafford (WTPUD), John Wright (McKenzie Industrial board member), Monica Heath (Executive Director, McKenzie Industrial Development Board and Chamber of Commerce), Noah McEwen (Centennial Bank, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce board member) and Chuck Sisson (President, Centennial Bank, McKenzie, IDB board member).

The Pottery Direct tour began in the showroom, where pots are displayed showing their different colors, shapes and designs. Davis introduced a new line of Tennessee Clay pots named after Tennessee towns and cities to the tour group.

Inside the factory, Davis showed the group how machines shape the wet clay into pots, dry the pots and glaze the pots. He showed them special 3D-printed tools used to make design imprints in the pots.

One of the last stops showcased the kiln, which reaches 2,093 degrees Fahrenheit. Each pot spends about five hours in the kiln after glazing.

Davis said Pottery Direct can make up to 10,000 pots in a day at their factory.

Following the tour, Davis encouraged chamber members to take a flower pot home with them.

Manufacturing Month events continued throughout October, with more tours at TCAT Henry/Carroll October 22 and UTM Latimer-Smith Engineering and Science Building October 29.

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Left, Administrative Office Technology Instructor Maureen Sledd informs McKenzie Chamber members about her class. Right, Information Technology Systems Management Instructor Tim Fann tells the tour group about his IT program inside the IT lab. Photos by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner

McKenzie Chamber Members Tour TCAT Henry/Carroll Facilities

BY LYNDESE SUMMERS
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McKENZIE (October 22) — Continuing Manufacturing Month celebrations, members from the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board toured McKenzie's Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) Henry/Carroll campus Wednesday, October 22. Instructors and select students guided the present chamber members through their campus' classrooms and labs and spoke about their curriculum.

TCAT Henry/Carroll is a training facility designed to simulate the occupational environment found in potential places of employment. The McKenzie campus offers seven full-time educational skill programs: administrative office technology; automotive technology; heating, ventilation, air conditioning (HVAC) and refrigeration; industrial maintenance/integrative automation technology; information technology systems management; machine tool technology; and welding technology. The tour began in the HVAC/refrigeration room, and instructor Darrell Pittman showed the tour group all of the HVAC and refrigeration

units students use for practice. Twenty students attend Pittman's class, and there is a 50-person waiting list for the class.

Students attend the HVAC/refrigeration class for 12 months to receive an HVAC diploma, and some students stay an additional four months to receive training in commercial light refrigeration or light commercial air conditioning.

The next stop was the machine tool technology room. Students Jonathan Fuentes and Brantley Nanney led the tour, stepping in for instructor Zak Crider. Fuentes and Nanney explained the role of a machine tool technician and the overall machining process.

Nanney showed the tour group a digital representation of how their machines can create products. Chamber members observed 3D printed products Crider made as a physical representation of the class' work.

Fuentes told the group, "Job security's always been a big thing for me...There's not a lot of automated processes that could take this job."

Students also led the automotive technology tour, stepping in for instructor Shanna Franklin who was helping students with a project. Stu-



Machine tool technology students Jonathan Fuentes and Brantley Nanney show the tour group a product they can make with their machines. Photo by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner

dent Eric Rogers showed the tour group around the facility, stopping in a room containing several practice automotive systems.

The automotive technology class is a fourteen-month program at TCAT Henry/Carroll, and most graduating students are matched with an employer upon graduation.

David Earley, welding technology instructor, led the next tour. Earley recently earned certification from the American Welding Society as a Certified Weld Educator, becoming one of three or four in the state to achieve such a feat.

TCAT Henry/Carroll's welding technology class

has 27 students, 15 of which are full-time students, and a 50-person waitlist.

The next stop on the tour was the industrial maintenance integrated automation facility. Instructor Jason Bloodworth spoke with chamber members about his program's curriculum. The industrial maintenance integrated automation is a full-time, 16-month program in which students gain experience in electronics, electrical, pneumatics, hydraulics, motor controls, programmable controllers, robotics, machine shop and related math.

Next was the information technology systems man-

agement classroom and lab room. Instructor Tim Fann led the tour group into the working lab, which will be demolished and moved to a different room once construction of McKenzie's new TCAT Henry/Carroll main campus building is complete.

The information technology systems management class is a 20-month program broken up into certification benchmarks. During the first term, students complete the A+ exam on computer building, maintaining, and repairing. The second term is for the network exam which focuses on routing, switching and cabling. The third term is Security+ and Linux, which focuses on data security. The fourth and fifth terms prepare students for the Cisco CCNA exam, which is for higher level networking. Most of Fann's students become IT specialists for banks, hospitals or manufacturers upon graduation.

Fann has 25 students in the information technology systems management class and a 20-person waitlist.

The last stop on the tour was Maureen Sledd's administrative office technology classroom, where she teaches nine students. Her class is a 12-month, 30-hour-per-week program. The first

term provides students with knowledge to become a general office assistant, and the second term provides students with the administrative support specialist certificate. The class also allows students to pick from four elective diplomas: accounting assistant, administrative assistant, medical administrative assistant and marketing assistant.

Sledd's current classroom will be demolished and relocated to the new campus building in December 2025 or January 2026.

TCAT Henry/Carroll teaches almost 100 full-time students and roughly 200 part-time, dual enrollment students across its campuses in Carroll, Benton, Henry and Weakley counties. To apply for a program at McKenzie's TCAT Henry/Carroll campus, prospective students need only to fill out an application and join the waitlist for their preferred class.

The McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board took TCAT Henry/Carroll students to Pottery Direct and Plastic Product Formers for tours on Friday, October 24, as part of their Manufacturing Month initiatives.



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TCAT students gather for a photo in front of Plastic Product Formers. Photo by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner

TCAT Students Tour McKenzie Industries

BY LYNDSLEY SUMMERS
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MCKENZIE (October 24) — In an initiative to keep McKenzie's future technical workers in the community after school, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board Director Monica Heath invited students from the Tennessee College of Applied Technology - Henry/Carroll (TCAT) McKenzie campus to tour Plastic Product Formers and Pottery Direct.

"These students are our future workforce," Heath said, "so I think it's important for them to get out and see what jobs are here [in McKenzie]. We want to retain all of our local talent."

The McKenzie Chamber has brought TCAT students on tours of McKenzie industries every year since 2021, with tour groups growing in size each year. This time, the group consisted of full-time TCAT students from the McKenzie campus and dual enrollment students from McKenzie High School, Weakley County Schools and Trenton Peabody High School. Also attending were Tessa Kyle, northwest Tennessee business development consultant from the Tennessee Department of



TCAT students gather for a photo in front of Pottery Direct. Photo by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner

Economic and Community Development; Jan Latimer, vice president of student services at TCAT Henry/Carroll; and several instructors from TCAT McKenzie.

The information technology systems management (IT), welding technology, industrial maintenance/integrated automation technology, administrative office technology (AOT) and machine tool technology classes were each represented in the tour group.

The morning began at Plastic Product Formers, where Operations Manager Patrick Ross led students through the industry's production lines and vast warehouse.

Plastic Product Formers, owned by VP Racing Fu-

els, mass-produces plastic multi-purpose utility jugs, which are sold in many hardware and utility stores.

Ross explained the industry's machining processes — how their three machines turn tiny plastic pellets into five-gallon jugs twice per minute — and what skills he looks for when hiring machine maintenance technicians. He also told students that the Plastic Product Formers building is climate-controlled, unlike many other local industries.

Students asked Ross about the company's starting pay and how to stand out in the hiring process. "Look, you guys in maintenance," Ross said, "don't be afraid...Go on Indeed and apply. When we see your

TCAT experience, we're probably going to call you."

Plastic Product Formers employs 39 workers. They are broken into two shifts — first shift from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and second shift from 3:30 p.m. to midnight — and work five days a week.

Plastic Product Formers has two open positions: one machine maintenance technician and two production line workers.

After the general tour, students broke into groups to receive more targeted tours. IT and AOT students toured the office rooms; welding, maintenance and machine tool students toured the machines and production lines.

The tour group then migrated down the road to Pot-

tery Direct, where Plant Manager Nick Davis met them.

Pottery Direct, recently bought by Syndicate Grower District, completes a flower pot every five to six seconds. The plant runs six days a week and produces around 60,000 pots per week.

Though the production line was down, Davis led the TCAT students through the plant and showed them the different steps of pottery-making while maintenance technicians troubleshooted the issue.

"In manufacturing, there will always be something that needs to be fixed. I promise you that," Davis said to the students.

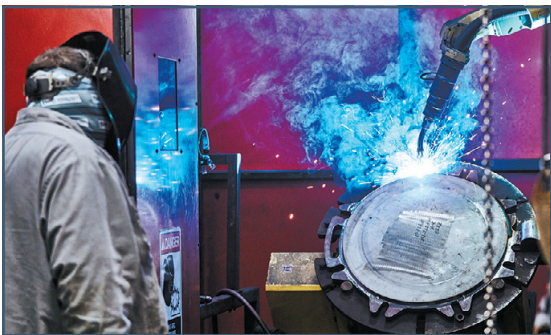
Davis responded to students' questions about starting pay for mainte-

nance employees (about \$25/hour) and where their IT work is handled (Kokomo, Indiana) before concluding the tour.

Following the Pottery Direct tour, maintenance student Michael Watson said he thought the tours were really interesting. "They gave me a chance to better look at how the industries operate," he said.

Watson will graduate from TCAT in December and said the tours were very helpful as he plans his next steps.

At the conclusion of the tours, students headed back to TCAT and enjoyed pizza provided by the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce and Industrial Development Board.





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