Elevator Mechanic Apprentices learn ropes from Journeymen

By Daniel Morgan

Since starting in the Physical Plant’s elevator shop 25 years ago, Jim Todd has seen it all, from a tattered historical book at the bottom of a hoistway in the Lilly Library to a stalled elevator with 25 people packed inside.

Now a journeyman, Todd is sharing his expertise with an apprentice, Jason Bell, who’s quickly adapting to the position’s rigorous requirements and analytical nature.

Indiana University’s Apprenticeship Program, established in 1978, develops skilled workers in all of the Physical Plant shops by pairing apprentices with journeymen for full-time training. The concepts they learn on the job are reinforced by required classes that apprentices must attend on their own time. Upon successful completion of the program, apprentices are certified through the U.S. Department of Labor and are promoted to full-time journeyperson employees.

Before joining IU’s elevator apprentice program two years ago, Bell worked as a dispatcher in the Physical Plant Control Room, but his work as a volunteer firefighter made him yearn for something more hands on. “I’ve always had an interest in mechanics,” he said. “I’ve tinkered on cars and trucks — pretty much anything mechanical — since high school.”

But in his time spent as an apprentice, Bell discovered that cars and elevators don’t have much in common. Elevators are engineered to last decades, but cars can start faltering after a few years of heavy use. “You don’t see many ’65 Chevys still on the road today, but these elevators are running up and down the hoistway all the time,” he said.

Despite its robust construction, an elevator can demand a lot of upkeep since it runs continually. Because of the small margin for error, even repairs that appear to be basic must be approached methodically. With hundreds of people cramming into elevators daily, safety is the primary concern.

“The most challenging part for me is the variety,” Bell said. “We’ve got 284 elevators across campus, and a lot of them are completely different depending on the manufacturer, size and year it was built in.”

And as national security standards become more stringent, more is being asked of elevator mechanics. “The way the law reads, anything that has to do with an elevator you have to be licensed for,” Bell said.

IU doesn’t take training lightly. Strict state laws require that all elevator apprentices are supervised by a journeyman on repairs for all four years of training, and classes must be taught by an accredited instructor. Bell and three other elevator apprentices attend classes once a week taught by Todd, who’s been certified by the National Association of Elevator Contractors to teach the courses.

Given the specialized nature of the craft, Todd said it’s hard to find a job without several years of prior experience, and that’s where IU’s apprenticeship program poses an advantage; it not only trains and educates apprentices but also guarantees them a permanent position and a hefty pay increase upon successful completion.

And although each day is unpredictable, Todd said, the work is seldom dull. “I like the troubleshooting aspect of it,” he said. “It’s like a puzzle.”
Carpentry designs custom desk for IU Professor

To the casual eye, nothing may look out of place in Woodburn Hall’s room 100. To Professor Trent Applegate, though, there’s a significant addition: a new desk.

But this desk serves a separate purpose from thousands of others across campus. It was meticulously designed by Physical Plant employees to assist Applegate, who suffers from ataxia — a neurological disorder that affects his speech, balance and coordination.

For more than 15 years, Applegate has taught First Aid and Emergency Care in Woodburn’s room 100, first as an assistant instructor and now as a senior lecturer in the Department of Applied Health Science through the School of Public Health.

He’s passionate about his work and tries to keep his students interested, too, but his condition sometimes makes it difficult to address his class.

“I can stand, but as soon as I take a step I’ll fall,” Applegate said. He uses a wheelchair but — with as many as 280 students in each class — likes to stand in front of the lecture hall so everyone can see him. He used to brace himself against an overhead projector but needed something that would allow him to transition from sitting to standing whenever he liked.

With guidance from Applegate, Wes Jones, a General Supervisor at the Physical Plant, designed a custom desk with several rails that will ease Applegate’s transition from sitting to standing and vice versa.

It was a somewhat peculiar project, Jones said, because he wasn’t given strict specifications to adhere to. “They had an idea of what they wanted to do but didn’t know how to make it work,” he said. “We had to come up with something stout and heavy since he’s going to be using this to pull himself up.”

To match the aesthetic of room 100, which has two historical murals painted by Thomas Hart Benton from the 1930s, Jones included square pegs to connect the joints and a dark stain finish on a red oak frame with walnut inlays.

Applegate anticipates that the desk will give him more freedom during class — both with his mobility and his lectures. “There are always spur-of-the-moment changes in class, so I can spare some time by doing things myself instead of having my (assistant) instructors helping me,” he said. “I’ll also be able to use my hands to demonstrate when I go through an analogy.”

If the desk serves its purpose for Applegate, Jones said he’s hopeful that the Physical Plant could help on more of these projects. “If it works for him, then something similar might work for others, too.”

Carpenter builds lecterns for President McRobbie

In general, the woodwork Dave Schleibaum does for the Physical Plant is pretty specialized. He’s earned a reputation for his craftsmanship over the years by cutting custom cabinetry, outfitting classrooms, and building a 25-foot curved credenza. So when he was asked to assist with the construction of two new lecterns for Indiana University President Michael McRobbie, he didn’t delay.

Schleibaum replicated the dimensions of an older podium that’s been used by several generations of IU presidents over the decades but has begun to show signs of wear. He matched the wood and finish to its specifications and took measurements, but noticed it only had a 2-inch toe kick. “I know I’m about as tall as he is, so I went ahead and added in an additional inch,” Schleibaum said. “That way I’ll know which is mine.”

Kathy Grant from the Physical Plant sign shop lent her expertise, too, by engraving the presidential emblem to attach to the front. The two lecterns will be used by McRobbie when he delivers lectures on campus and can be packed up and hauled with him whenever he travels abroad.
Thank You Notes
To Campus Division landscapers

I have wanted to say thank you so much for the beautiful flowers and plants for over a year now. They are so gorgeous and always kept up so well. They never fail to put me in a better mood whenever it’s been a stressful day (which is practically every day). I always am sending pictures to my mom and grandma. It’s so easy to not look at my phone. Thank you so much!

- Sabrina Acker, business student

Thank you for all the incredible work you do on our campus! All of your hard work shows off every day. It’s because of you I am so excited and happy to walk to class every morning! Thank you for keeping campus beautiful and making me proud to call myself a Hoosier.

- Daniella B-Y, business student

Thank you for everything you do to keep our campus looking beautiful and in tip-top shape year-round! We have one of the most beautiful campuses in the country and much of that is due to your extensive efforts. Seeing all the daffodils in the spring always makes my long walks through campus a lot more enjoyable.

- A thankful IU student

A letter of gratitude
From President McRobbie

August 25, 2014

Tom Morrison
Vice President for Capital Planning and Facilities
Indiana University

Dear Tom,

With the return of students last week and the start of classes today, I have never, in my 18 years at IU, ever seen the IU Bloomington campus look as beautiful as it looks this year. It is a truly magnificent way to greet what we expect will be another record IU class.

Students, of course, come to IU for a world-class education, but they are also attracted by the physical beauty of the campus — its great and iconic buildings, its stunning grounds and landscaping, and its superb public art. Thousands of students have remarked to me on how much they enjoy working in such a charming and graceful environment. And for alumni, it remains an enduring memory of their time in Bloomington and is a powerful magnet for drawing them back and inspiring them to support IU in many ways.

I would like you to convey my personal thanks, and those of the whole campus, to all the thousands of outstanding staff who make this campus the remarkable show piece that it is. Please convey a copy of this letter to them. As I said in one of my updates earlier this year, their efforts are not always heralded, but they are deeply appreciated by the entire university community. It is because of them that, as Herman Wells said, “Everywhere the eye rests on campus, it sees something of beauty.”

Yours sincerely,

Michael A. McRobbie
President

Office of the President

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Staff Appreciation
Cookout a success

It’s easy for Physical Plant workers to get caught up in the rush of projects and corresponding deadlines during the summer months, but they received some much-deserved recognition last month. Senior administration organized the second annual Staff Appreciation Cookout on Sept. 9, with an afternoon meal for daytime workers and an evening cookout for night workers.

As an extra token of their gratitude, several managers manned the grills, cooking 575 brats and 520 burgers for workers from all shops. “We want to let Physical Plant employees know that they are valued as part of the whole Physical Plant team — regardless of what job they perform — and that their dedication and service is not unnoticed,” said Human Resources Manager Jamie Gayer.

Gayer, along with Kathy Wiegand, assistant administrator, and Faye Elkins, assistant director of finance, coordinated the cookouts and arranged pickup for the catered food, including 50 pounds of pulled pork, 800 pieces of fried chicken, 1,000 cans of soda and nearly 800 bags of chips.

For employees, it was striking to see all the workers gathered in one place. With different work crews strewn all over campus for daily tasks, it’s easy to lose sight of how extensive the Physical Plant’s team is. “It’s hard to realize how many people work here until you see everyone out here together,” said Brad Schiller, a mechanic in Distribution Maintenance.

Administrators hope to continue holding the Staff Appreciation Cookout in future years.

View more photos on back

Sabrina Acker, business student

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A thankful IU student
Top: Steve Petry, Mike Baker and Scott Rugenstein keep watch over the brats (left); Jack Burkhead chowing down (middle); Andrew Lowry and Bart Taylor enjoying the weather (right)

Middle: Physical Plant employees provided music for both cookouts (left); Vice President Tom Morrison chats with Hank Hewetson and Stan Martindale (right)

Bottom: Randy Sutherlin, Jennifer Krebbs and John Sexton line up to serve meals during the night-shift cookout (left); Will Bowman makes a selection from the wide array of desserts (right)