

Painter Liuvia Saucedo gets direction from instructor Justin Chapman at the Finishing Trades Institute of BC.



Finishing trades school uses unique approach to train young workers

By Marnie Douglas

A 14,000-square-foot expansion and investment in high-tech gear at the Finishing Trades Institute of BC is giving young apprentices more opportunities to train in safety procedures.

Formed in 1992, the Finishing Trades Institute of BC (FTI), offers training for apprentices and journeymen in painting and decorating, glazing, drywall finishing, and lather/interior systems mechanics. Part of their learnings include hands-on safety training in a variety of disciplines such as confined spaces, fall protection, elevated platform safety, first aid, and hazmat training.

Just last year, their Surrey campus expanded to include customized shops, larger classroom space, and new specialized equipment, such as a swing stage, a scissor lift, an articulated boom lift for the glazing program, and a new plural component pump for the industrial painting program.

“Many of these apprentices hadn’t even seen a plural pump in action, let alone actually get to use one,” says FTI’s director of training Patrick Byrne. “After receiving expert instruction, all of our apprentices are developing the necessary skills required to become proficient in the proper use, care, and maintenance of this highly technical machine.”

Apprentices also get to test out techniques in a controlled and safe environment, such as the virtual spray paint station, where apprentices can learn to apply a paint coating without spraying any real paint. The opportunity to be trained not just in techniques, but in the safe application of those techniques is invaluable, says Al Johnson, vice-president of Prevention Services for WorkSafeBC.

“Safety training is fundamental to any health and safety program,” he says. “Employers need to provide their workers with information, instruction, training, and supervision in order to ensure a healthy and safe workplace.”

Supported by industry

Currently, about 250 workers come through FTI, split 50/50 between union and non-union members. The expansion at the Surrey campus was funded entirely by District Council 38 of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, which represents more than 2,000 tradespeople from across B.C., such as painters, glaziers, wall and ceiling installers, drywall finishers, hazardous-materials abatement specialists, and water blasters. They are the trades that FTI supports and offers courses in.

The school also works closely with BC’s Hazardous Materials Association (HMA) to offer extensive hazardous-materials training. All employees of HMA-member contractors receive hazardous-materials handling training courses at FTI, so that they know what to look for, what the risks are, and how to handle hazardous materials, such as asbestos, mould, lead, and PCBs, safely and efficiently.

The biggest problem with asbestos — and why it can be so challenging from an education perspective — is the lack of immediate health effect, says HMA’s executive director Don Whyte. Workers can be exposed and not see the health effects for some 20 or even 30 years.

“Naïve workers are being exposed to this hazardous material and often without their knowledge. We have to stop handling asbestos like it’s not a hazardous material,” he says.

Through FTI and the HMA, workers can get the training they need before harmful exposure starts. Specifically, the training covers health hazards of exposure to asbestos and other hazardous materials;

the use, maintenance, and limitations of respirators and protective clothing; work area designation and preparation; containment, negative air pressure differential and airlocks; dust suppression; use of HEPA filter vacuums; and personal decontamination procedures.

Following an initial training program, new employees are paired with experienced workers who provide site-specific training. After an initial course and then 150 working days, the employee returns for another stage, and repeats the process until all three stages and eventual certification are complete.

Emma Gibson, project and safety manager with HMA-member contractor Enviro-Vac, says each of their employees goes through the broad training offered through HMA and FTI BC. The combination of classroom learning and hands-on practical applications, completed over roughly two years, offers valuable assurances to the employer.

“The employee gets the mentorship and we see them through the whole process. We’re in the hazardous-materials abatement business, and it’s not for everyone. Not everyone can work in a mask and suit all day. Through this training, our workers get to understand the job and whether it’s for them, and we get a well-trained employee,” she explains.

Continuing to expand

Byrne says FTI will continue to look into gathering state-of-the-art equipment. Changes have already been felt by their students with the introduction of newer lightweight equipment.

“The new protective hoods and blast/spray outfits are much more comfortable and lightweight than the previous generation of protective equipment,” says Byrne.

They also plan to introduce automated glazing manipulators. “Much of the heavy lifting is now being carried out by these incredible machines, taking away the overly physical aspect of the work involved.”

Overall, FTI wants to ensure that students are not only trained for today’s challenges, but the challenges of the future as well. “Our focus is to ensure that those coming through our programs have all the skills needed to respond to the changing industry needs.” ☺