

On the cover



Superintendent Dimitri Margaritis (right) and occupational safety officer Brian Tuccori discuss training young workers at one of Fourth-Rite Construction's worksites.

# Mentorship program helps young carpenters

By Gail Johnson

Young workers are the backbone of Fourth-Rite Construction — in fact, many of their current senior staff got their start at the company. Now, they give back to their new employees with training, mentorship, and a safety culture that starts in recruitment.

Carpenter and superintendent Dimitri Margaritis has been doing the job he loves for three decades, but he still remembers his early days in the industry — and how daunting a construction site initially seemed.

“I worked hard,” Margaritis recalls. “But I remember what it was like: When you go onto a site for the first time, it’s intimidating.”

Margaritis got his start as an apprentice for Fourth-Rite Construction — the same Abbotsford-based company he works at today as a superintendent. While the company put him through apprenticeship training through Kwantlen Polytechnic University, he tended to keep quiet on the job and didn’t ask a lot of questions.

His early experience was a common one. Canadian research studies on young workers have shown that young workers can be reluctant to speak up and may feel that they lack the authority or experience to address workplace health and safety. Margaritis wanted to change that.

About five years into his career at Fourth-Rite, he suggested that the company reach out directly to high-school students who may be interested in pursuing a similar path. This was the start of a young worker training-program that continues to this day. The program supports young people as they work toward endorsement in their trade, either through post-secondary education or the Interprovincial Standards Red Seal Program.

Here’s how the Fourth-Rite young worker training-program works. Margaritis himself visits carpentry classes at secondary schools throughout the Lower Mainland. This gives students the chance to ask questions about the industry; they tend to be curious about expectations, job prospects, and pay rates. Those who are interested have a direct line to Fourth-Rite and can apply for a job straight out of school. The company hires about ten students every year.

## Ongoing mentorship — with no time limit

From the moment they start, young workers are paired with at least one senior employee, who stays by their side until they’re ready to work independently — no matter how long it takes. There’s no time limit on mentorship. Even after apprentices successfully complete the exam for their Red Seal endorsement, they can still get a lot out of being mentored. It’s not enough just to know the skills; they need to be practiced safely and well, says Margaritis.

The pair program helps put the focus on the students themselves. Everybody has a different learning style and pace. With a paired mentor, on-the-job training can be individually tailored and adapted.

The new hires are immersed in the company’s safety culture, learning proper practices and procedures, from tool safeguarding to the use of protective gear.

**“Taking the initiative to communicate with young workers and encourage them to communicate, allows their voices to be heard.”**

—Brian Tuccori, WorkSafeBC  
occupational safety officer

The opportunity to observe — and get to know the worksite and their peers — can set young workers up for success. “Young workers who observe their peers and supervisors addressing workplace safety are more likely to bring forward their own concerns,” says Angélique Prince, a WorkSafeBC Industry and Labour Services manager specializing in new and young workers.

Fourth-Rite’s new hires also get experience in wood-frame and concrete construction and advanced carpentry techniques, but not until they grasp the basics.

“For the first three or four weeks, I put them on clean-up,” Margaritis says. “The reason I do that is so they get used to the site. Construction sites are so big,



Dimitri Margaritis, Emily Wade, and Mike Severson go over blueprints at the worksite.

and there's a lot of big machinery. On clean-up, they adjust to it. They do basic tasks and attend our safety meetings every week."

Young workers are also encouraged to ask questions, both of their mentors and anyone in the company they come in contact with, including company leaders.

"We teach them right away how to be safe. We want them to ask questions. I tell them if they're having any problems to call me. We all work together."

Aside from tasks such as shaping wood or constructing stairs, young workers also learn valuable skills such as the importance of showing up on time and having a strong work ethic. "These are life skills that will benefit them regardless of how or where they spend their careers," says Margaritis.

Since the program first started more than two decades ago, the company has hired approximately 140 people, some of whom have stayed and moved up to more senior positions. It's heartening for more experienced workers to see younger ones develop in work and in life.

"A lot of our foremen were students," Margaritis says. "The young-worker program is the backbone of the company. The senior workers love it. They're teaching somebody who has no experience and they get to

watch them grow, and get their ticket, and become certified carpenters, and then maybe buy their first home. It feels good to give someone a chance."

### Collaborating with safety professionals

There's another layer to Fourth-Rite's in-house safety measures. The company has hired an independent safety consultant who acts as its corporate safety manager. James Benz, the founder of JMB Risk Management, will often visit the company's construction sites unannounced to assess workers' practices. He says the safety training for young workers at Fourth-Rite is comprehensive and unrushed.

"There's commitment from ownership all the way down to supervisory personnel, ensuring that these young workers are trained, monitored, and helped along the way for as long as they need," Benz says. "A lot of employers or experienced employees don't necessarily understand their responsibilities when it comes to new, young workers or take the time to understand their responsibilities.

"The biggest thing to make a health-and-safety system work is buy-in from management," he adds. "It can be a long and strenuous process, but if you're committed, you see results."

Margaritis also collaborates with WorkSafeBC for input. “When WorkSafeBC comes on site, I want to hear what they have to say,” he says. “They’re there to help me; that’s how I look at it.”

WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Brian Tuccori, who specializes in construction, says that what stands out for him about Fourth-Rite’s approach to safety is how workers are encouraged to speak up about safety.

“I’m impressed by the quality of communication and how candid and open the lines of communication are,” he says. “It opens up the dialogue between young and experienced workers. Taking the initiative to communicate with young workers and encourage them to communicate, allows their voices to be heard.”

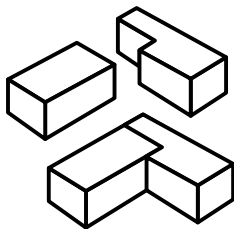
At the end of the day, Margaritis wants to keep hearing young workers’ views, concerns, and questions.

“This is a family company, and our workers are like family,” he says. “We don’t want anyone to get hurt.” ☺

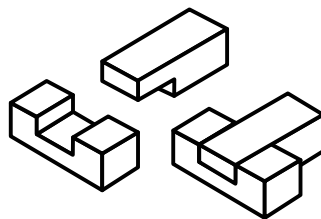
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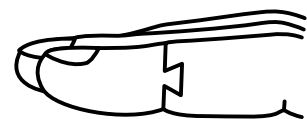
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