



Hands-On Learning: A Welder's Journey Through Apprenticeship Reagan Andree, Apprentice - Philly Shipyard

The Hanwha Philly Shipyard offers hands-on training and valuable industry experience for workers through its registered apprenticeship programs. The Keystone Development Partnership (KDP), through the Partnership for Advanced Manufacturing Apprenticeship (PAMA) grant program, has supported the Shipyard's apprenticeship program for several years. At the Philly Shipyard, Reagan is forging a new career path as a welding apprentice in United Association Plumbers Local 690. Approaching her first full year in a three-year program, Reagan's experience offers valuable insights into the world of modern apprenticeships and the transformative impact they can have on individuals and industries alike.

Reagan's journey to becoming a welder was unexpected but welcome. "I've always wanted to work with my hands," she explains. "I've always been a better learner hands-on. I've had experience working with mechanics and cars, taking things apart, putting it back together." This natural inclination towards practical work led her to the shipyard's apprenticeship program, a significant shift from her previous studies in forensic anthropology and pathology. "Before, I was studying to become a forensic anthropologist and pathologist, and now I'm a shipyard worker. And quite honestly, I like this a lot more," she reflects, demonstrating the power of apprenticeships to open up new and unexpected career opportunities.

The program's structure is designed to provide a comprehensive learning experience. "The biggest benefit was like the first three months, they put you as a laborer, so you can learn what the job's going to be like," Reagan shares. This initial period allows apprentices to acclimate to the work environment before diving into more specialized training.

A key feature of the Philly Shipyard's program is its on-site training facility, known as the Academy. Reagan appreciates this integrated model: "Everything is on-site pretty much." This approach differs from many apprenticeship programs that require students to attend classes at separate educational institutions.

The classroom experience at the Academy is engaging and supportive. "The teachers are really fun. They make the classroom setting really entertaining," Reagan notes. "They're always answering questions and not making you feel like any question's bad." This nurturing environment encourages learning and helps build confidence in apprentices as they tackle new skills.

On the job, Reagan's typical day involves a variety of tasks related to ship construction. She explains, "I'm doing a lot of finalization right now, so I'm testing the fire main, the fire extinguishing foam system, or service air valves." This hands-on work allows her to apply classroom learning directly to real-world situations.

Mentorship plays a crucial role in Reagan's apprenticeship experience. She speaks highly of her supervisor, Joby: "Every time I have a question or I'm not sure about something, I go to him, and he walks me through it, helps me understand it. He kind of took me underneath his wing and is showing me the ropes." This personalized guidance is invaluable for apprentices as they navigate their new career paths.

The union plays a significant role in supporting apprentices like Reagan. "The union has been very helpful... if we get injured or if anything happens. They are there to support us and help us through whatever goes on. They back us up like 100% of the time," she explains.

When asked about what keeps her committed to the program, Reagan cites the satisfaction of the work itself. She also notes that seeing her own progress continually motivates her to move forward in the apprenticeship. The fact that Reagan moved across the country from Houston to Philadelphia for this opportunity underscores her commitment to the program.

For those considering an apprenticeship, Reagan offers enthusiastic encouragement: "If you enjoy blue-collar work or you enjoy building things or putting things together, I would say absolutely do it. It's so much fun. You learn so much and it's just all around a great job."

Reagan's experience at the Philly Shipyard exemplifies the potential of well-structured apprenticeship programs. By combining hands-on work experience with classroom learning, mentorship, and union support, these programs not only prepare individuals for skilled jobs but also foster personal growth and career satisfaction. As the demand for skilled workers continues to grow, stories like Reagan's highlight the vital role apprenticeships play in shaping the future workforce and offering fulfilling career paths to those willing to embrace them.

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