

A GREAT FOUNDATION FOR MANUFACTURERS



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

AT KEIHIN CAROLINA, ASSEMBLING AUTO COMPONENTS STARTS WITH A TALENT PIPELINE

By Lawrence Bivins

Patrick Stallings likes setting goals.

At 18, the recent graduate of Southwest Edgecombe High School plans to pursue computer-engineering degrees at Edgecombe Community College and East Carolina University. He envisions a life and career in his native Edgecombe County. "It's where I grew up and where I want to be," says Stallings.

Thanks to Keihin Carolina Systems Technology, LLC (KCST), Stallings and other local grads are on clear paths toward promising careers. As an apprentice at Keihin, Stallings works at the company's 147,000-sq.-ft. production site in Tarboro, working part-time as he pursues a Journeyman certificate. "My long-term goal is to stay here at Keihin and in Edgecombe County," Stallings says.

KCST launched its apprenticeship program six years ago and has relied on close, mutually beneficial relationships with educational institutions since opening its state-of-the-art facility in Tarboro in 1998. The partnerships produce a reliable pipeline of local talent with the skills needed to assemble and test electrical components for Honda vehicles made around the world.

"When we came here, we knew we would need to hire from the local area, and they wouldn't have any existing experience in the type of work we do," explains David Catt, plant manager at KCST. The company quickly established ties with Edgecombe Community College, whose 120-acre campus sits just half a mile away. "ECC customized a training program specifically around our needs," Catt says. All the company's new-hires, regardless of prior experience, must complete 30 hours of basic training at the college.

Catt and his colleagues are vigilant in maximizing the quality of the KCST operations. The 465-worker plant maintains an ISO/TS-16949 quality certification specific to automotive-related product. In 2015, the North Carolina Chamber named the company North Carolina Manufacturer of the Year. KCST's association with North Carolina State University's Industrial Expansion Solutions helped it earn a Baldrige Milestone 3 award earlier this year.

"We're a Tier One supplier to our customer," Catt says. The plant assembles engine control units that are shipped from Tarboro to Honda assembly sites in four states, as well as to plants in Canada, China, Japan, Mexico, Thailand and the United Kingdom. "We've received awards and set benchmarks for best practices from Honda for our sustainability," he says.

Keihin employs about 55 engineers in Tarboro, professionals drawn from graduates of East Carolina, N.C. State and other universities. The company's educational partnerships are beneficial to both sides. Catt serves on the advisory board for State's Industry Expansion Solutions, which offers quality, safety, sustainability and other expertise to companies across the state. The company funds scholarships in its name for students at local high schools, Edgecombe Community College and ECU's College of Engineering and Technology. "We believe that being a good corporate citizen means giving back to the community," Catt says.

The electronics classroom at Southwest Edgecombe High owes much to KCST's engagement. "It started with supplies and minor parts," recalls Frank Matthews, who teaches high school and college-level electronics courses there. The company even sent in personnel to help with teaching. Then came a total makeover of the classroom, complete with new paint and interiors, a large-screen TV, wireless network and audio system. "It's first class," says Matthews. "Everything they do and touch is first class."

Keihin's apprentices must be students from Southwest's electronics program. The company selects two rising seniors each year. Applicants submit transcripts, attendance records and other materials. Those who pass must then undergo a 20-30 minute interview with company officials. "The interview was one of the most difficult things I've ever done," says Patrick Stalls, who applied for his apprenticeship upon advice from Matthews, then his teacher. "Many of the questions involved character," he recalls, "what you would do and how you'd react to certain situations."

Korey Corbitt heard about the apprenticeship opportunity from a KCST staff member who visited Southwest in 2012. "It sounded interesting," recalls Corbitt, who completed the program in 2015 and is now enrolled in Manufacturing Technology studies at Edgecombe Community College as he works full-time at Keihin. "The company's tuition reimbursement is based on grades," he says. An 'A' earns 100 percent reimbursement, for example, while a 'C' gets only 50 percent. "There's no reason not to work really hard and get an 'A'," says Corbitt.

Corbitt, who turns 21 in August, plans to pursue a Bachelor's in electrical engineering once he completes his Associates degree at Edgecombe Community College. "I will still work at Keihin while I'm doing it." He likes the way the company's culture treats employees as family. "You make a lot of friends here," Corbitt says. "And I love Honda. I have two Civics."



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