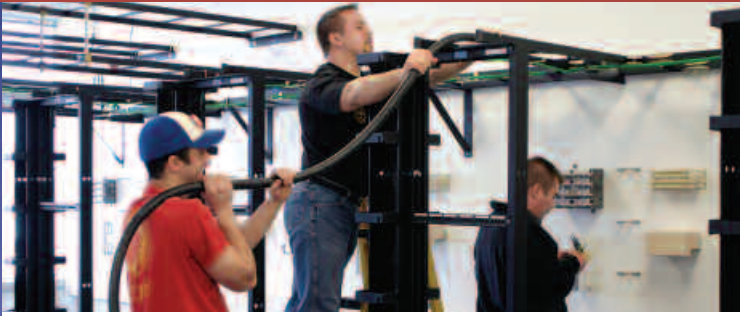


'Dream' Training Facility Offers DuPage County Day & Night School



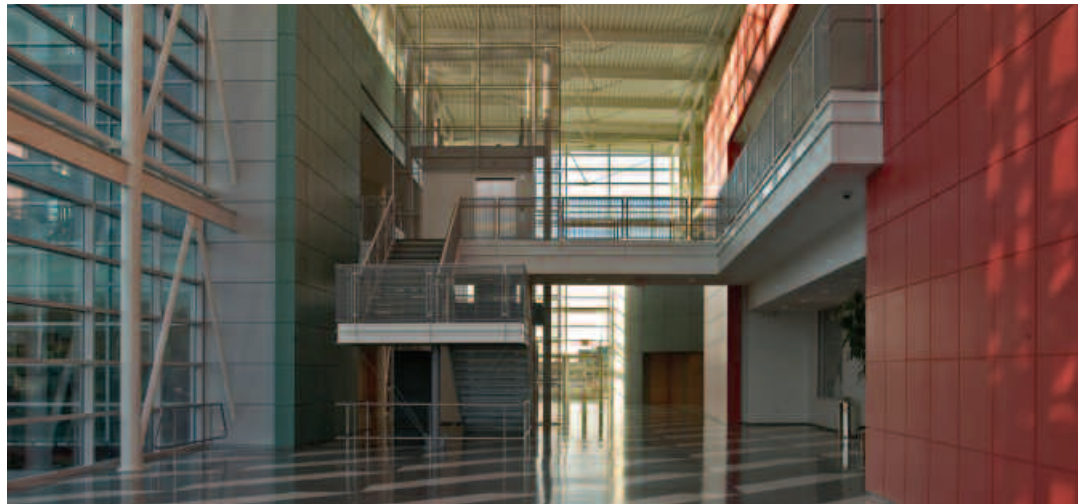


AFTER 22 YEARS AS AN INSTRUCTOR and training director, Ed Rossi had a clear idea of what would be required in his “ideal” training center. He got his “Dream Facility” in DuPage County, Illinois, just outside Chicago.

The construction was funded by the pension fund jointly administered by IBEW Local Union 701 and the Northeastern Illinois Chapter of NECA. After receiving approval to help the architect design the building from Arthur Ludwig (then the local’s business manager) and Mike McInerney of Gibson Electric, who chairs the pension trust, Rossi went around the country to visit other state-of-the-art training centers, including Pittsburgh’s (see related article on page 36). What he saw inspired him to help design a training center where every classroom has a “theme” or specialization. Modules include motor control, fire alarm, security & CTV, pipe bending, and cable pulling & splicing.

However, the new facility also reflects the needs of the local market and the way Rossi himself re-tooled the entire program in 1996, when he became training director. For example, training in DuPage County places a heavy emphasis on residential wiring, and, because the local code prohibits homes to be wired without piping, one aspect of what the newest electricians learn is how to bend pipe and install it into wood studs. “Upstairs are nine lab/classrooms for the smaller disciplines, and there’s a big room downstairs to teach the piping required for the residential installation aspect of what we do here,” Rossi says.

“We have day school and night school,” he elaborates. “We offer four tracks our trainees can run along: commercial; teledata; residential; and something we call reclassification. The first two years, everyone goes to class during the day. After that, they can choose to do one more year in resi- →





dential or three more in commercial or two in teledata. Regardless, at that point they begin going at night, one night a week for 32 weeks and two nights a week for eight, to make the 180 hours of exposure they need.”

Asked to explain reclassification, Rossi relates that residential training is provided through a three-year program and commercial training through a five-year program. “After working in the housing marketplace for three years, our apprentices sign a book that they’ll be re-trained the last two years and they’ll get their JW (journeyman wireman) card. This approach keeps our people in residential until they have some experience behind them.

Each of the lab/classroom’s themes is taught by specialists in the field. “Our instructors have been fantastic,” says Rossi. “When I started in ’96, we had eight teachers. I broke everything down into specializations and added staff. Today, we have two full-time instructors with 26 specialty teachers—three for motor control; three for fire alarms; two on security; one on sound; and so forth.”

“We keep all our instructors up-to-date by sending them to seminars to recertify them in different areas,” he adds. “The contractors often help. They’ll be sending someone to help their business, and so we’ll pick up the class fees while they pay their wages. It’s very much a cooperative effort.”

Each classroom has hands-on work stations—enough for 10 to 14 students. “I’d always thought it was kind of sad for students to be standing around while a teacher demonstrated because there was only one work station,” says Rossi. “I

know I’ve always learned best in situations where I get my hands on the equipment. “So I went to the manufacturers and I asked for the world and hoped I’d get at least something. I’m a pretty good salesman; I’d start off saying I wanted 20 panels, and most folks would give me one or two.”

“So our fire alarm lab, for example, has panels from companies like Siemens, Simplex, and Edwards. Our motor controls lab is completely outfitted by Square D, with the help of local distributor, Steiner Electric. They put \$28,000 worth of equipment in there and we only had to pay \$1000. All I had to do was ask, and they realize it’s good PR for them to have our people training on their equipment.”

The new building not only houses the training facility but also the offices of the partners in the local IBEW-NECA team and their pension fund office. It provides space for other industry-related business functions, as well. Surprisingly, this state-of-the art complex came in \$200,000 under budget when it was

finally opened and dedicated in November 2003.

“All of us involved with this construction are thrilled with the outcome,” says Contractor Mike McNerney. “As chairman of the joint NECA/IBEW Pension Fund, I can say we wanted to invest in a building that’s conducive to learning. Business-wise, we made a sound investment decision to own this facility and rent it to the JATC and other organizations using the space. What I’m personally most pleased about is the return on our investment for those who are participating in our pension plan.”

“You know, when you’re involved with a construction project this big, you sometimes say, ‘I wish I’d done this or that differently.’ Well that hasn’t happened,” Rossi concludes. “We haven’t had to move one wall, not one outlet; we haven’t changed one of the themed classroom/labs. That tells me a lot of good people were partnering to make this building as good as it can be, making sure it was done right. It’s been great to create exactly what we’d wanted.”

The result: Specialists training in specialized rooms for special disciplines determined by the marketplace they serve. It’s a great investment for the Pension Trust Fund—and for the future of the industry! ■

