

# Stevens Towing Company Opens Gateway to YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP

Seaports are essential to South Carolina's growing economy, providing the gateway for interstate and international commerce. Stevens Towing Company, Inc., a midsize freight transportation company, has buoyed the region's economic trade by serving the Charleston area for more than a century.



Specializing in transport, towing and marine repair, Stevens Towing provides a fleet of tugboats, barges and cranes, and a ship for all freight and construction operations. The Stevens shipyard is located 25 miles south of Charleston, and contains two marine railways, a 150-ton marine travel lift and 500 feet of dockage for topside marine repairs. Highly trained certified welders, blaster/painters, mechanics, electricians and riggers make up the experienced team at Stevens Towing.

Recognizing the need to develop a continued source of skilled employees, Stevens Towing turned to youth apprenticeship through the SC Technical College System's Apprenticeship Carolina™. Stevens established a student apprenticeship program in January 2017 at the Yorges Island shipyard. The goal of the program is to foster ties with the local community through Baptist Hill Middle/High School, and to develop a workforce pipeline through collaborative training and mentoring.

According to Benjamin Smith, vice president of operations at Stevens, "We created this program for two reasons: community connections and labor availability for welders. Our long-term business needs dictate the necessity to train welders and educate them in our facility with our work. They

are more likely to stay here for the long term if they are local and their families are local."

Smith added, "Currently, we have four welders in training, and I would like to expand the program to mechanics and riggers. We have used this system for years with our tugboat operators. Thirty to 40 captains started as deckhands on our tugboats and were mentored as steersmen. The long-term employment prospects are high with an apprenticeship program in place. The retention rate is phenomenal."

Smith's vision to create a welding apprenticeship led to bringing back William Holmes, a local, experienced welder and former employee who had retired as a shipyard supervisor with Stevens after 25 years. Holmes returned to Stevens' shipyard in January 2017 to instruct the Baptist Hill students in a welding apprenticeship. He teaches the students proper techniques of SMAW "Stick" welding, GMAW "MIG" welding, grinding and oxy-fuel cutting, while incorporating workplace safety and the use and care of tools and equipment.

Mathilde Dumond, welding teacher, praised Holmes' experience. "Mr. Holmes is the perfect mentor for these apprentices due

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*Vanessa Brown, Principal, Baptist Hill Middle/High School, in the middle foreground surrounded by Baptist Hill students visiting the Stevens Towing shipyard*



*Linwood Wallace, Shipyard Supervisor*

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— BENJAMIN SMITH, VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS AT STEVENS TOWING



to his vast knowledge, expertise and patient demeanor. They respect and admire him as an instructor, and as a member of the local community.”

Holmes, himself a former graduate of Baptist Hill High School, said, “I would like to thank Stevens Towing for implementing this apprenticeship program. A big advantage of it is partnering with a lowcountry high school where trade skill education is limited.”

Holmes and Dumond designed a curriculum structured with a duality of classroom instruction and hands-on practice in the shipyard based on the SC Standards for Welding Technology I and II. Dumond added other pertinent lessons, including soft skills, career development, communication skills and financial literacy. Other topics covered in the classroom include basic math and measurement, journal writing and identification of hand tools.

“The Baptist Hill apprentices earn an elective credit toward their high school diploma for this class, so we incorporate a well-rounded skill set for them as they transition to college and full-time employment,” Dumond explained. “We want them to be successful in their career, and in life. The opportunities for learning are

everywhere in this shipyard. Apprentices observe a myriad of activity such as a barge being repaired, a tugboat being drydocked, a hatch cover being fabricated and a ship being launched. It is an exciting place to learn and ameliorate their job skills. Additionally, every week we have a guest speaker come in to cover topics such as safety procedures, firefighting, 401Ks and investing as well as artistic welding.”

Libby Singletary, human resources director, added, “All of us at Stevens Towing are so proud to be part of the company’s community outreach to provide opportunities engaging local high school students in learning a skill that will enhance their lives. Learning a job skill can be transformational, it changes your life forever.”

The principal of Baptist Hill Middle/High School immediately saw the benefits of youth apprenticeship. “Since we are located in a rural area with limited business and industry opportunities for our students, when we were approached by Stevens Towing to develop an apprenticeship opportunity, we knew we had to make it work,” said Vanessa P. Brown, M.A.T., M.Ed. “Our partnership with Stevens Towing helps us to meet our goal of ensuring our students have access to opportunities to prepare them for college and career readiness. The students enjoy being a part of the real-world work environment while learning welding skills



*Instructor William Holmes and students inspect barge*

from the people who do it every day. Stevens provides authentic career readiness to our students.”

According to Johnson Stevens, president of Stevens Towing, “Our goal is to offer the students in our community a work-based learning opportunity where they can develop a skill. Many of our employees live in this community, and this is our home. The apprenticeship program is an investment in building our community.”

Several of the welders at Stevens Towing also began their trade in vocational classes in high school. Linwood Wallace, shipyard supervisor and a 37-year employee at Stevens, was introduced to welding and other trades at his Williamsburg County high school and later at Williamsburg Technical College. “We are trying to give our local people a trade and a way to make a living,” Wallace said. “Our guys want to pass on their trade, and we have a retired employee to do the training.”

Thomas Hillie, a welder and mentor, agreed on the importance of passing on his knowledge to the apprentices, “It is my job to teach them; my line of duty.”

Hillie mentors apprentice Jason Woods, who shared, “I am shadowing Hillie and learning to weld next to him. I like it. Everyone accepts me and teaches me. I learn new skills every week, and I am learning to get comfortable in tight spaces. Welding is about being comfortable. You could be kneeling, sitting or standing. Once you get comfortable in your position, you can work better and do what you need to do.”

Woods continued, “As an apprentice, you have to pay attention to what you are doing at all times. It is not just practice. You have to pay attention to your tools and your crew around you for safety. With the apprenticeship program, you get an understanding of everything, and it pays you while you learn. You have to be a hard worker and dedicated to the job.”

Susan Stevens, vice president of public relations at Stevens, summed up the positive aspects of apprenticeship perfectly, “This program benefits the students, the school, the community and our company. It’s a win, win, win for everybody.” ■

## Stevens Towing Company

Stevens Towing Company, Inc. is a midsize freight transportation company based on Yorges Island, South Carolina, with a mid-Atlantic operation based in Edenton, North Carolina. Founded in 1913, Stevens Line Company originally operated two boats transporting produce, passengers and mail from nearby barrier islands to Yorges Island. Today, Stevens engages in Inland, Coastwise, and Ocean Towing with a fleet of tugboats, barges, cranes, and a ship for all freight and construction operations. Stevens Towing currently services the East, West, and Gulf Coasts of the U.S., including the Western Rivers and Great Lakes, as well as international ports.

