

More Welders, Fewer Baristas

By Daniel Simmons | Staff Writer

Just a few miles west of I-75, about as close to the dead-center of Kennesaw as you can get, you'll find something that stands out from the patchwork of suburbs that make up the rest of the city. Surrounded on all sides by neatly paddocked ¼ acre backyards, strip malls, and 24-hour gyms there's a sprawling landscape of hills framed by vast windowless walls of corrugated steel and miles of chain link fence. An atrium of industry in the heart of suburbia. There, flanked by a NAPA auto parts and an HVAC shop, you'll find a small brick building bearing the large red and white sign that reads: 'WELD LAND.'

The building behind that sign is home to Georgia Trade school (GTS), which, like the swath of industry that surrounds it, is largely overlooked and little-known by the locals. That's because this post-secondary school offers something most people strangely don't consider when they're trying to decide what to do after high school: employable skills. Your average high school student plods his way from high school into college in the same way as he did from middle school to high school; as though it were the inevitable next step in an educational process that he's got to get out of the way before he can enter the real world.

If only these students knew that instead of spending four years in college and racking up an average of \$64,000 in student loan debt only to graduate and find themselves in a workforce that doesn't necessarily need them, they could have spent three months in training, come out with no debt, and started making



\$50,000 per year at age 19.

This is where GTS comes in. For those relatively few who are aware of the incredible opportunities that await practitioners of skilled trades, GTS is there to help. As its moniker suggests, 'Weld Land' specializes in teaching welding but it doesn't stop with teaching. Not only does GTS bring its students from zero welding experience up to certified welder status, but they also partner with the country's largest employers of welders to help ensure that their students graduate with a job, and with a 96 percent placement rate, it's safe to say they're doing a good job of it.

About 20 percent of Georgia Trade School's graduates go to work for a company called Ingalls down in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi building battleships for the U.S. Military. Beyond the great pay and huge opportu-

nities for overtime, this job also affords you the opportunity to live in a beautiful town on the gulf coast with gorgeous beaches and endless ways to have a good time with all that extra money you're making. GTS graduates who would prefer to stay in-state have plenty of options as well. Caterpillar employs about ten percent of the school's graduates and has factories in Athens and LaGrange. There's also Trinity Industries, who makes rail cars and has a huge need for welders to help meet their massive production schedule, which is back-ordered by almost four years. And let's not forget about the huge need for welders to work on Georgia's new football stadium. Steel LLC, another GTS partner, employs graduates to weld the trusses of the new Falcons stadium. The list goes on but you can start to see the trend here: companies that hire



welders really need there to be more welders to hire. Unlike a communications degree, a welding certificate will go a long way in making you employable.

Despite these massive opportunities as well as the job security that comes with being a welder in a world full of baristas with liberal arts degrees, it's hard to believe that trade schools like GTS have become something of a well-kept secret. But the fact of the matter is that if you're willing to put a little bit of sweat equity into your résumé and break with the ill-informed trend of treating college as a necessary step towards adulthood, you can put yourself in a financial position that's leagues beyond most of your peers. And if your college-bound friends ever hassle you about your decisions, you can always text them a picture of yourself on the beach at the gulf coast and ask them how finals are going. ❖

