



Staff photo by Andy Molloy

**BREAK TIME:** Men training to become machine tool operators take a break outside the mobile training vehicle Wednesday in Augusta. They are, from left, Tom Burton of Oakland, Donald Ducharme of Waterville, and Adam Weir of Waterville.

## Classroom on wheels offers precision machine training

By COLIN HICKEY  
Staff Writer

**AUGUSTA** — Recreational vehicles are supposed to be about fun and leisure, but there are always exceptions.

For the last two weeks, one of those exceptions could be found parked next to the CareerCenter at Augusta Business Park.

This RV didn't have a single fishing rod, baseball glove or tennis racket on board. Instead the vehicle features 12

computer stations, an interactive graphic display board and two miniature machining centers — bought with a \$3 million U.S. Department of Labor grant.

This is the classroom equipment needed for the Machine Operator Skilled Training, or MOST, that 12 highly motivated men from the area immersed themselves in for the last two weeks — the class ends today.

Forget about fun and leisure, this RV is

all about education and employment.

"Fast and Furious" is how Project Manager Charles Lincicum described the training — a pilot program that involves 80 hours of training in precision machining over 10 days that is run by the six New England divisions of the Manufacturing Extension Partnerships.

John Grotton, a 20-year-old Augusta resident, had no complaints about the work-

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load, or the cramped quarters, and for good reason.

"Having a good job at the end of two weeks is a definite bonus," Grotton said. "Hopefully that works out for me."

More than likely the training will work out for Grotton.

Lincicum said 54 of the 55 people who have completed the course since sessions began in January have landed jobs in the machining profession — the Augusta group is the seventh class to go through the program and the second one in Maine.

Grotton could find himself working for Mid-State Machine Products, a precision machining company based in Winslow.

Mid-State has agreed to give job interviews to the eight trainees taking the course — the remaining four students are current Mid-State Machine employees picking up additional skills.

"We found out about the program and expressed an interest and are going to give it a try," Dana Berry of Mid-State Machine said. "We think it gives us another avenue to acquire people with some basic abilities."

Mid-State Machine and other precision machining companies wish more avenues were available.

"I think our industry in the state of Maine is facing a sub-

## MACHINE TRAINING

The Machine Operator Skills Training (MOST) RV, currently parked next to the CareerCenter in Augusta, offers a free two-week training program for people with little or no background in machining with the goal of providing them with enough basic skills to land an entry level job in the profession. Here are some facts about the training:

- 54 of the 55 people who have taken the course are now working in the profession

- Students go through 80 hours of training in 10 days

- The RV is equipped with 12 computer work stations, an interactive graphic display board and two miniature machining centers

- Applicants must meet basic academic standards in order to qualify for the training

- The pilot program is funded by a \$3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor

- The RV will return to Augusta for another MOST class in the late fall or early December

stantial shortfall of qualified people," Berry said. "We continually look for qualified machinists. The community colleges cannot provide an adequate number. (The MOST program) may be one means to meet one of our needs."

Lincicum said the program is equivalent to a two-year course at a community college and at no charge for those accepted into the program — applicants must meet basic academic requirements and go through an interview process.

Students who complete the program are able to do basic machine operation, enough to be hired in entry-level positions, Lincicum said.

"There is no mistake here," he said. "It takes a lot more training to make a skilled machin-

ist."

Still, entry-level pay in machining is hardly a pittance.

Lincicum said across New England wages range from a low of \$9 to a high of \$17 per hour.

He said the ones hired in South Paris started at \$11.57 per hour with a 10 percent shift bonus for evening work, and many of those workers had been either unemployed or underemployed.

Don Ducharme, 36, of Waterville knows about unemployment. He had recently gone to a temporary job agency to get work after being laid off from a textile company in North Monmouth.

But when he learned of the machine operator training, he overcame his apprehension

about math and applied for a spot.

Lincicum said Ducharme has been an exemplary student, bouncing back from early struggles with the material to score A's on subsequent tests.

As part of the program, Lincicum divides the class into four three-man groups — the class has no women. Each group has to complete four two-day modules that focus on specific aspects of machining.

Lincicum dedicates the first day of the course to refreshing his students on the basic math skills needed for the training. On Day 2 he focuses on blueprint reading.

He is quick to acknowledge that the course crams a great deal of information into the two weeks of training.

Ducharme does not disagree.

"It stays in your mind," he said of the material. "I wake up at night to go to the bathroom and all this stuff is still going through my head."

Kim Gray, a CareerCenter consultant, said the latest MOST graduates will go to Mid-State Machine on Monday for tours and interviews.

She said Mid-State Machine has indicated it will make its hiring decisions by Wednesday, with a starting date of Aug. 14 for anybody hired.

The MOST RV will return to Augusta in late fall or early winter to offer another two-week training session.

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