

South Florida Construction Career Days Rounds Up the State's Best for Transportation Jobs

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For South Floridians, the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds is the spot for cattle roping, bull riding and similar wild-west sports, complete with rodeo clowns in full regalia. But for two days in October, the Grounds become an arena for a different type of round-up, gathering the region's high school students for a bull's eye view of the transportation construction industry.

Now in its 10th year, the South Florida Construction Career Days is an annual event designed to expose students to the various jobs and education opportunities within the construction industry. More importantly, the event seeks to improve the representation of females and minorities in construction and engineering jobs, as well as overcome the stereotype that the industry is unwelcoming to diverse groups. But for the kids, it's a day of outdoor fun where getting dirty isn't just allowed, but encouraged.



Western High School's ROTC Color Guard leads the procession of students into the 2010 South Florida Construction Career Days.

Partnering with Federal Highway Administration and more than 75 local contractor and consultant firms, Florida Department of Transportation's District 4 and Turnpike Enterprise hosted about 2000 students representing 55 schools. An army of more than 450 volunteers ensured students were able to experience each discipline and also kept the water flowing as temperatures and humidity reached a sticky 90. Event coordinator and FDOT Turnpike COO, Jennifer Olson noted, "We absolutely could not do this without our volunteers. Many of them come year after year and generously donate their time and energy in so many ways. It's a labor of love and we are grateful."

Among the equipment available for operation were two backhoes, a bucket truck, concrete drum, front end loader and crane, to say nothing of Florida Highway Patrol safety simulators and a variety of tow trucks and emergency vehicles. Students also took instruction on filming public service announcements; work zone safety; structures design; concrete testing; site development; bridge design; signalization and much, much more. Not to be outdone, Broward College and other institutions advised students on both four year courses of study and job specific curriculum, providing a glimpse of average salaries in the construction industry. Local businesses sponsored mock interview labs, and showed students how to write a cover letter and draft a resume. One of the volunteers, Vice President of Marketing for Florida Transportation Credit Union Stacey Forget said, "I am absolutely blow away by the poise and sophistication of these kids. You get the impression that children today have a sense of entitlement with no desire to work hard, but I'm not getting that at all. I'd hire any of them right now. I'm very impressed."



S'Kaylah and Brittany from Ft. Lauderdale High learn that a brownie mixture with walnuts, coconut and sugar makes sweet asphalt.

Another event organizer, Marty Anderson, FDOT's District Construction Compliance Manager, expressed surprise at the low number of females in the construction trades. "I mean, look at all these girls," she said, "they are even better than the boys working this equipment and they are the first to raise their hands to ask questions." Anderson hopes that events like this will show young women that their education and career opportunities are truly unlimited and that that transportation construction field needs their talent and enthusiasm.



Marissa from Monarch High operates a front end loader. "It was so much fun. I loved it!"

For the first year, schools from Hendry County participated. On hand with his future constituents was Hendry County Commissioner, Karson Turner, who offered a sobering reminder. "Hendry County and the surrounding area have been hit really hard by the economic downturn. Unemployment is high. It's really important for kids to be exposed to events like this and to know that construction is a heck of a place to be right now." Jonathan Bennett, a volunteer from first year participant, Tarmac Construction, agreed, advising students that concrete is the oldest product in the world and that jobs that involve concrete will always be needed.



Jonathan Bennet of Tarmac, a first year participant, explains how drums are used to turn concrete.

Fortunately, the harsh realities of the workaday world are still months or even years away for these students, who took the opportunity away from the classroom to have fun and enjoy the day. “It’s really fun and easy,” said Breanna of Monarch High School, who deftly operated a backhoe before deciding that a career in construction was not for her. Other students like Makinly from Hialeah, found the work more enticing. After playing skeet ball from a fifty-foot bucket lift, he commented, “it was tight. I was a little scared at first, but you get used to it. I could definitely see myself doing this for a job.”

At the end of the day, tired and dusty, students headed back to the ranch assured that transportation careers await those who are interested. But even those with different ambitions agreed that a day at the construction rodeo was a foot stomping good time.



Hialeah student, Makinly and Signal Group representative, Dustin Copeland look down from the bucket of a 50 foot lift.

Construction Career Days are held in a number of states and, in many cases, are eligible for FHWA funding. If your organization is interested in partnering to develop a CCD for your area, contact

National Construction Career Days Center
c/o URI Transportation Center
Carlotti Admin. Building, University of Rhode Island
75 Lower College Road
Kingston, RI 02881

Jeff Cathcart
Technical Advisor (events east of the Mississippi River)
(401) 874-7075 phone
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FHP Officer Najm gives students a peak at a sobriety test through 'drunk colored glasses.'



Leigh and Dave representing Parsons Brinckerhoff and Tierra sit behind the ingredients for homemade 'concrete cookies'



Students design bridges under the supervision of volunteer staff from New Millennium



Students from Cypress Bay affix road signs in FDOT Maintenance Road Rules lab. Brittany (left) commented, "I love this! I'm going to be an architectural engineer."



Bob Bureson, president of Florida Transportation Builders Association, takes a moment from an FDOT strategy meeting to ham for the camera.



Ron of Metric Engineering shows students from Hialeah Miami Lakes a lightning disperser used in signalization.



Pete Nissen, District 4 FDOT Event Organizer, applauds the volunteers at the end of Day 1.