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PLANE CRASH KILLS MAN WALKING ON VENICE BEACH » A12

EDUCATION



Brittney Tanner hands a practice baby to Carsi Bellamy during a fetal presentation lesson at the Fort Myers Institute of Technology.

Trade school secret to many folks' success

Institute of Technology among best in state

By Emily Atteberry
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After 15 years in the car business, Shannon Rousey was burnt out. His blood pressure was soaring, he was losing sleep and he knew he was in a dead-end industry.

So, he decided to make a dramatic change: He was going to become an appliance repair technician.

He enrolled himself in a year-and-a-half appliance repair program at the Fort Myers Institute of Technology, the district's vocational secondary education center, and dove into a world of gadgets and tools he knew nothing about.

"People thought I was crazy because I was good at my job and making a lot of money," Rousey said. "But the second I quit the car business, my blood pressure medication got cut in half."

Rousey is not alone in his success. A recent study found that 77 percent of institute graduates are employed, the highest rate of all 47 technical centers in Florida.

See SCHOOL » A10



Practical nursing student Jennifer Kubesh gets rid of air bubbles in a saline-filled syringe at the Fort Myers Institute of Technology. PHOTOS BY SARAH COWARD/THE NEWS-PRESS

FORT MYERS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

1,400

Annual enrollment

29

Average student age

54

Percentage who receive financial aid

\$2 million

Financial aid distributed annually

30 acres

Campus size

1966

Year opened

NORTH FORT MYERS

Troubled tourist spot is saved

Shell Factory raises enough clams to pay its key creditor

By Laura Ruane
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The 76-year-old Shell Factory & Nature Park has a new lease on life, thanks to a \$2.5 million loan from a group of supporters that closed Friday.

"It's a huge relief. Now I can sleep at night," said Tom Cronin, owner and general partner.

Less than four months ago Cronin and his 85 employees faced possible foreclosure on the sprawling property sandwiched between U.S. 41 and Business 41 in North Fort Myers.

The iconic Southwest Florida tourist attraction hit a brick wall this spring, even as its parking lots were full of customers: A \$1.2 million mortgage note had come due.

Lender Branch Banking & Trust wasn't willing to extend the repayment period, and on April 11 filed notice of its intent to sue the Shell Factory.

That's the same day The News-Press published an exclusive story in which Cronin disclosed his predicament.

Although the Shell Factory was recovering nicely from the recession and was current on its mortgage payments, Cronin said he couldn't meet the bal-

See FACTORY » A11



THE WIZARD AND THE WIZ

Quality Life Center's theater program has upcoming show.

INSIDE » CAUSES

FOLLOW-UP

She's given up on adoption

Teen's assaults — and a claim that the system misled and forgot her — lead to decision

By Janine Zeitlin
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Michelle Start's voice wavered in juvenile court as she asked a judge to protect her from her 16-year-old daughter.

"I'm tired of being beat up," Start told Lee Circuit Judge Nick Thompson.

The 41-year-old was there be-

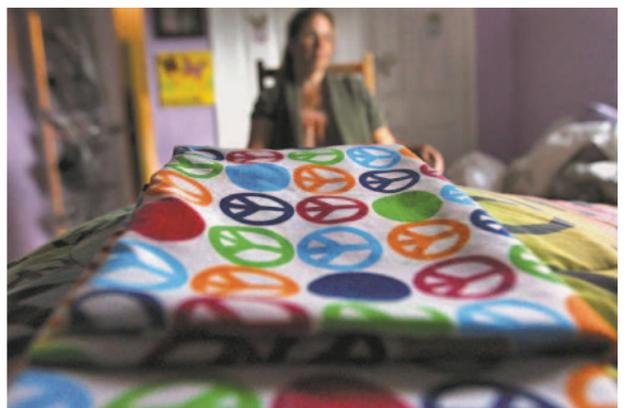
cause she was again listed as a victim in a battery case filed against the girl, who stood silently on the opposite side of the Fort Myers courtroom packed with teenagers and grim-faced parents. She had pleaded not guilty through a public defender. Start still had marks on her arm from where she said the girl bit her and photos showing welts on her breasts.

Four years ago, she adopted the girl because she wanted to be a mother.

This July morning, Start asked the judge if he could prevent the girl from attending the Lehigh Acres high school where she works as an English teacher. He could not provide that assurance.

"I'm trying," Start sighed. "I know you are," Thompson said, gently from the bench. "She's probably trying in some ways, too, but it's not visible or she's thinking about trying."

See DISSOLVE » A8



Buckingham resident Michelle Start had hoped to salvage the relationship with her adopted daughter, but she has since decided to surrender her rights because of repeat violence. THE NEWS-PRESS FILE

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School

Continued from A1

Institute graduates also enjoy the highest first-year median salary of all the centers, according to a recent state-commissioned study, "Higher Education Pays: Measuring the Economic Security of Florida's Postsecondary Graduates."

They make \$38,064 on average, the study reported, compared to the \$28,884 salary earned by students with associate degrees from state colleges.

Bill McCormick, the school's director, said the recent findings were even better than he had hoped. He attributed the school's success to its ties with the Southwest Florida business community and the school's large alumni network.

Take, for example, the institute's partnership with TGM Inc., a turbine generator company based in Cape Coral that works across the U.S. and Latin America.

David Branton, the company's CEO, was at FMIT for a seminar a few years ago when he met McCormick. Branton mentioned he was having a hard time finding young, trained mechanics.

"Bill didn't even know what a turbine generator was but said he wanted to help," Branton said.

Branton and McCormick created a course at the institute to teach students turbine generator maintenance and repair. Though the curriculum was approved for use across the state, FMIT is the only vocational center that offers it.

"We've graduated three classes so far (at FMIT) and hired the best of every group," Branton said. "We're paying \$20 an hour right now off school to do these jobs, and they get travel all around the Southern Hemisphere."

Rousey's courses at the institute began with the basics. Soon, he could fix



Nursing student Jennifer Kubesh, left, wincing as she injects fellow student Milad Mikhail under the watchful eye of instructor Denise Patak. SARAH COWARD/THE NEWS-PRESS

A handful of companies in the area actively recruit institute students.

just about anything — and, it turned out he was good at it. He won first place awards at regional and state appliance repair competitions.

After graduating in May, Rousey made another bold choice: He would open his own repair business in Lehigh Acres.

The first few months at Appliance Medic were tough, he said. His wife's job kept the family afloat. But after he started getting to know people, the phone began to ring — a lot. His wife left her job to join Appliance Medic, and now business is "fantastic," he said.

A handful of companies in the area actively recruit institute students including Sunstreaks Salon, Fox Electronics, Micro Control Systems Inc. and Everglades Farm Equipment.

Ron Andersen, the vice president of Micro Control Systems, said his company has hired about 20 institute graduates within the past 10 years.

"We needed people who were electronic tech-

nicians. We put an ad out in the paper, and many people said they did electronics, but they really didn't... So then we looked at students at FMIT," Andersen said. "We find that the level of their training is very, very good — extremely good, actually."

McCormick said the school prides itself on its low cost. Almost all of the institute's courses cost less than \$5,000 and the majority of students receive Pell Grants that cover their education in full.

Workforce shift

Given the rising cost of a college education and a tough job market, more people are questioning the value of a college degree, McCormick said.

"More and more people are beginning to realize the value of a skills-based education rather than a four-year education, not just here in Southwest Florida" he said. "The pendulum has sort of swung, and it doesn't make economic sense to spend sixty-five to eighty-five thousand dollars on

college anymore."

Other programs that have "exploded in popularity" at the institute in the last few years include nursing, appliance repair, and HVAC. Graduates of these programs can usually expect to make \$15-20 an hour immediately after graduation, he said.

McCormick said the institute's high employment rate is a testament to the country's shortage of young, skilled workers.

"Any mechanical trade is kind of a dying breed," Branton said. "Kids get out of high school and they don't know what they want to do, and these kinds of options aren't presented to them."

McCormick said people usually associate vocational school with shop class and goggles, but he said the institute is much more than that, calling the school a "hidden secret."

Rousey, the owner of Appliance Medic, urged high school students to consider all their options.

"Everybody's telling these kids in high school, 'you gotta go to college, you gotta go to college.' But not everyone can push paper and pens, and people have to be in the field. We have to have electricians and plumbers," he said.

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Zounds® Founder and CEO, Sam Thomasson and his daughter, Kate



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