

Kentucky Company Clearing a Path in Education/Workforce Partnerships One Log at a Time

BRYANTSVILLE, KY. – Gwen and Tommy Mitchell own and operate a unique business. Rocky Top Log Furniture and Railing Company (RTF) is a company built around the idea of making anything and everything from logs.

The Mitchells have operated the business for more than 20 years creating an impressive list of customers along the way.

Their business is so popular, the couple is starring in a reality show called “Log Heads” based on what they do and how they do it. Tommy describes it as a home make-over type show where they complete a surprise project for someone during each episode.

In addition to their love of the business, the Mitchells also have a love for the people that work for them some of which have been with them from the start. So, it comes as no surprise they are working to educate a new workforce generation.

In keeping with their “uniqueness” the business has partnered with recruitment and workforce solutions organization Adecco Staffing USA and the Kentucky School for the Deaf (KSD) to put students in a cooperative learning program, allowing them to get real world, work experience while supplying RTF with a few extra employees.

“We came to this location in 1999 with 16,000 square feet and thought that was huge at the time and now we’re at 80,000 square feet,” said Tommy Mitchell.

But the partnership is more to the Mitchells than just getting extra workers; it’s about giving students an introduction into a whole new



Under the watchful eye of Tommy Mitchell, KSD student Dillon Maynard puts together a table top using a piece of machinery in one of the shops at Rocky Top Furniture.

world, said Tommy.

Gwen Mitchell said of the students in the co-op program, it is they who have really taught her and Tommy something as opposed to teaching the students.

“They taught us a whole different way of being around people with a hearing impairment,” she said. “Our guys in the shop were nervous because they didn’t want to let those students down as were the students but at the end of the day both were happy.”

Tommy Mitchell said he has seen a big change in his employees in that they have come out of their shells to help with the students.

The KSD students are working at RTF as part of the school’s Education for Employment program. Dillon Maynard, a senior student at KSD just finished his co-op duties at RTF. Being in the advanced manufacturing class at the school helped in this job, he said.

“I learned many things about working in the real world at the school and I saw an opportunity by coming to RTF,” he said. “The hands-on activities I learned in class transferred here to this work experience program. I really enjoyed working here.”

Jay Cloud is the advanced manufacturing teacher at KSD. He said making the connection with math classes through his program really helps the students in an environment like RTF.

“This is real world experiences with numbers” he said. “These students have benefited both in his math skills and his English skills in helping to communicate and creating a resume.”

Cody Downey and Ryan Mayes are both junior KSD students who are also participating in the work program at RTF. Both said the experience has been rewarding and something they want to continue.

“I like it here and I want to do something with more of a challenge later,” said Downey.

Mayes said he likes doing new things and working with new tools, something he has gotten to do at RTF.

He also said that he has brought some of the learned aspects of the

job back to the classroom.

Cloud said the job has provided realistic life skills for the students with the Mitchells even setting up real interviews the students went through giving them an idea of what interviewing for a job is like.

Dillion said for the first three years he attended KSD, he didn’t have much confidence because he was still in the deaf culture but now, being out in the real world working, I see a different culture and has learned how to approach the hearing world.

Cloud said these students now they know they can be successful in the hearing world; a credit to both the students and the Mitchell’s.

Megan Searles, client services manager for the employment solutions program at Adecco Staffing, noted that the Youth Employment Services (YES) project focuses on the importance of getting students at the high school level into the workplace to learn vital professional skills that will help them find employment in the future.

“As I work with students in the YES program, I give the guidance to look at all the options available to them,” said Searles. “The program is primarily for high school juniors and seniors and the goal is to teach them about the workforce while making the program as easy on the companies involved as possible.”

Many industries have shied away from high school help because of their age as it relates to insurance purposes. Adecco has, in effect, removed that barrier by being the employment services component of co-op or pre-apprenticeship programs.

“The companies we partner with are providing a huge opportunity for these students so we work to mitigate the risks and tasks on the administrative side so these companies can focus 100 percent on their business and the best interest of the students,” said Searles.

She added that the idea of the program is to provide a work-based environment for the students and not just to add new employees to a participating company.

Gwen Mitchell said she is interested in getting more students and those who could work on the administrative side.

“This has been a blessing for us,” she said. “The students have those fresh ideas and they’re always fun to have around.”

Tommy Mitchell said the students have become real assets to the company and will be missed when they are gone.

But it is apparent, those students will take something with them that will last throughout their working careers.



KSD students Cody Downey and Ryan Mayes work on a custom made end table as part of the work they do through the co-op program at Rocky Top Furniture.



Gwen and Tommy Mitchell pose in front of their reality show’s logo