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Upping the crew: Movie pros train students for jobs

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Though they now follow orders like "Kill the baby, hang the midget and get two blondes for the martini," the students at Mansfield Studios aren't as rough as they sound. They're just learning the lingo that's used daily on movie sets.

"We need to train the local market s o we can have more lamp operators and grips," said Bob Bates, an experienced gaffer. He's co-teaching two back-to-back training courses with Ted Sapp, an experienced key grip. The training course, which is being taught eight hours on weekdays at the movie studio in south Shreveport, ends Friday.

Bates and Sapp work in the local movie industry and are aware of the need to add trained crew workers to the local work force. The more local hires a movie makes, the more it saves on labor costs.

Their students have split time learning about the lighting and grip departments during classroom and hands-on practical sessions. For the latter, they set up, light and shoot practical movie sets to see whether what they have learned will work on real sets.

"If I could have taken this 15 years ago," Sapp said, "it would have been a great benefit."

Bates and Sapp learned their trades by apprenticing on live movie sets, which move quickly and can be baffling for the uninitiated. Not only do the students need to know the names of light fixtures called "baby," "midget" and "blonde," but they must learn to supply the right amount of electrical power wherever it's needed: be it on an indoor soundstage or an outdoor movie set on the streets of downtown Shreveport.

"Safety is a huge issue," Bates said.

Federal grant pays for courses

The courses — two weeks of lighting department training followed by two weeks grip department training — are being offered to 41 students by the Mansfield campus of Louisiana Technical College and sponsored by Mansfield Studios and Louisiana Production Consultants.

The courses' costs — including student expenses, instructors' salaries and film equipment rentals — are being paid for by a \$101,000 grant from the Pathways to Construction Employment Initiative. That grant amount breaks down to \$2,463.41 per student.

The U.S. Department of Labor initiative was started in 2006 to support post-hurricane economic revitalization efforts in Louisiana and Mississippi. Grant money totaling \$10 million was distributed evenly between states to community and technical college training programs.

Jill Heard, dean of LTC's Mansfield campus, said the course is serving a need for the area.

"Whatever they learn in each of those courses can be applied in other fields," she said. "They are not just learning trades the movie industry needs. Shreveport needs electricians, too."

Students gain experience

Once they complete the training courses, students have a better chance at getting movie industry crew jobs that pay more than \$22 per hour.

John Wood, who has worked as a set dresser, has enjoyed learning about grip and lighting work.

"I'm taking the class to expand my options," Wood said. "I'm learning that it takes more than one person."

Meg Marchand, who went to film school at the University of North Texas, has worked as an entry-level production assistant on local movies. She said the hands-on training with movie pros has been valuable.

"We don't get a lot of this in film school," she said. "Getting to work with a lot of the equipment is really intense."

Courtney Gaston, an experienced theater lighting designer who graduated from Centenary College and works with local theater companies, said she's working to find correlations between theater and film.

"You're lighting for the camera and not for the human eye," she said. Learning to calculate electrical equations on the fly is challenging.

"I'm just bad at math," Gaston laughed.

Todd Salley, who has worked in computer systems for years, said his field is changing, and it's important to prepare for new opportunities.

"We've been exposed to so much so fast," he said. "I was debating about going to Hollywood to get training, and then this popped up."
