

Construction workers compete on their skills

By Marcia Heroux Pounds
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A sea of white hard hats spread across the crowd, but it wasn't a construction site. It was the entire ground floor of The Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center.

Except for the hum of machines, all was quiet Thursday as more than 200 construction-industry workers from 32 states worked intensely on tasks that included electrical wiring and fire sprinkler assembly. Judges rated them on their skills and safety practices.

The workers were vying for top spots in the National Craft Championships, held for the first time in Fort Lauderdale.

The competition "is tougher than I thought it was going to be," admitted Jeff Gravenstreter, 28, a competitor in the electrical category. A fourth-year apprentice who works for MBI Electrical in Davie, he said he wanted to make his soon-to-be wife, Jackie, proud of him.

He was one of five competitors in the apprentice training program by Florida East Coast Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors. The competition, sponsored by the national ABC group, included both a written test and six hours of hands-on application of their skills.

Greg Sizemore, chairman of the competition for the past four years, said the national event highlights "the best of the best" in the industry. Many of the craft workers in the 28-year-old competition later become managers and leaders in their industry, he said.

Samuel Irizarry, 35, competed in the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning category. The fourth-year apprentice works for Excell Refrigeration in Lantana.

After serving in the military in Iraq and Germany, Irizarry said he returned in 2007, just as the recession was hitting the U.S., and he couldn't find a job. But since becoming an apprentice, Irizarry said, he has doubled his wages to about \$65,000 a year.

"I've advanced very quickly," said Irizarry, married with five children and living in North Lauderdale.

Tim O'Brien, vice president of Sprinklermatic, a fire protection systems company in Davie, was cheering on employee Daniel Hernandez.

"He's passionate about what he does," said O'Brien, explaining that education is a priority for his company, which sponsors three to six apprentices each year in ABC's South Florida program.

Wages for fire protection system workers average \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year, he said. He expects his workers will make as high as \$80,000 this year on a government-funded project.

Broward County Commissioner Chip LaMarca, who attended the competition Thursday, said students coming out of the county's high school and trade schools should consider an apprenticeship in the skilled trades. "It's a career where there's going to be a job waiting for them," he said.

Peter Dyga, Florida East Coast Chapter ABC president, said he hopes the National Craft Championships, which is booked for two more years in Fort Lauderdale, will help bring "dignity back to working, especially those who build the infrastructure in our country."

ABC's South Florida apprentice program invested \$1.3 million in training last year and is the largest construction training program in the state.

Construction companies, which are seeing demand rise, are desperate for both entry-level and journeymen skilled workers, Dyga said. Many had to find work in other industries, such as oil, during the recession and housing crisis.

Dyga said he welcomes anyone interested in learning a skilled trade. Contact the Florida East Coast chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors at 954-580-2950.

"If they're willing and serious, they've got a job," he said.

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