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CVTC First Stop for Worker Fleeing War-Torn Iraq ***Zaid Abdullah worked closely with American troops, contractors***

Eau Claire, WI – About a month after leaving a job as a mechanical procurement engineer working closely with the U.S. military, Zaid Abdullah found himself at Chippewa Valley Technical College. He attended an Industrial Mechanic Boot Camp, where about a dozen people were learning the basics of a new trade.

Zaid's bachelor's degree level of education and impressive work history set him apart from most of his classmates in the program, which CVTC runs in conjunction with Workforce Resource, but his presence was appropriate, and helpful to others. On Nov. 5, Zaid got off a plane from Iraq, where he had spent all 30 years of his life. He needed work and a quick education on life in America.

And he is ecstatically happy to be here.

"The United States is the land for opportunities," Zaid said. "I was dreaming to come here to complete my education. I have a bachelor's degree from my country and I would like to get a master's degree from here."

During its long presence in Iraq, the American military worked closely with private American companies providing support services and completing infrastructure projects. Those companies work with local talent. With strong English skills, Zaid worked as a translator, but was soon working in professional capacities related to his education.

He worked with companies like KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton; General Electric; and DynCorp.

"I worked with Wisconsin troops and Oklahoma and Virginia troops over there," Zaid said. "My position there was in the supply chain. I supplied them with many materials and spare parts for machinery and equipment." Some of the work involved construction of a power plant.

The U.S. has a program that enables locals who work closely with American companies and military forces to earn a chance for a visa and permanent resident status in the United States.

"I started with this program in 2015 and got the approval of the chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. It was a long process, but I got an interview and clearance in the middle of July," Zaid said.

Zaid is grateful for a fresh start in the U.S. As recent events has shown, Iraq is still a troubled place.

“The security over there is very bad,” he said. “People are facing problems every day. We need to establish democracy over there.”

He chose this area because he was looking for a cooler place, and he had an Iraqi friend in Chippewa Falls.

Workforce Resource directed Zaid to the Industrial Mechanic Boot Camp, a short but intense introduction to the world of the general mechanics of industrial machinery. The program is designed to spark interest in the field, in which demand is extremely heavy, and lead participants to further their training and fill some of those open jobs. The program was offered in December at CVTC’s Eau Claire and Menomonie campuses.

“We cover pneumatics, hydraulics, the internet of things, AC-DC electrical, motor controls and electrical troubleshooting,” said Darrin Falk, instructor at the Menomonie campus. “We try to give students some exposure to our program and hopefully they will find it interesting enough to take a course.

Placement is 100 percent for those who complete a one-year program, Falk said, with starting pay over \$20 an hour for someone with no experience.

Zaid came in with experience and was able to show others how to work some of the controls, though some things, such as English measurement units, were different. He is unsure of his next step in furthering his education. Zaid said he is impressed with CVTC, but his first need is to land a job.

Zekia Hodgson of Wheeler, originally from Black River Falls, is more typical of the people who enroll in the boot camp. She works for Fahrner Asphalt and is on seasonal layoff. Workforce Resource directed her to the program.

“I thought it would be something interesting to take,” Hodgson said. “And all of our oil trucks use pneumatics and hydraulics. They spray oil while they’re laying asphalt and sometimes the spray bars aren’t working right. This will help me troubleshoot what’s wrong.”

Hodgson feels her experience in the boot may lead her to a better job, and is considering looking into the CVTC program.

With over 155 programs offered both online and on-campus, Chippewa Valley Technical College delivers superior, progressive technical education which improves the lives of students, meets the workforce needs of the region, and strengthens the community. CVTC programs are designed with input of business and industry to prepare graduates for today’s jobs, with 95 percent employed within six months of graduation and associate degree graduates earning an average annual salary of \$46,816.

Outline:

Zaid Abdullah, left, who was living in Iraq just weeks ago, works with CVTC Industrial Mechanics Instructor Jeff Johnson on a pneumatics training device during an IM Boot Camp lab exercise.

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