



Waste Not, Want Not

“WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES, ANOTHER OPENS.” THAT IS WHAT PAUL DARRAH LEARNED OF HIS EXPERIENCE IN THE JOB MARKET. FOLLOWING A TOUGH ECONOMIC PERIOD IN 2008, DARRAH’S FAMILY-OWNED ANTIQUE BUSINESS WAS SHUTTING ITS’ DOORS.

Thanks in part to his upbeat attitude and natural knack for tinkering, Darrah quickly rebounded and earned a top spot as the Wastewater Treatment Plant Superintendent for Spring Township.

The Wastewater Treatment program began in 2009 after the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) partnered with RACC to provide training and education for new operators in the high-demand field. Many similar programs in the area closed, so the College jumped at the opportunity to meet this need for employers through its workforce development programs via the Schmidt Training and Technology Center.

The 180-hour certification program covers all the necessary instruction, course work, hands-on training and module exams necessary to prepare for the final licensing exam. On average, a quarter of the students in the program are wastewater workforce incumbents who are seeking further training. Another quarter of students

typically come from manufacturing companies seeking to specialize in wastewater, while about half of students enroll with no prior experience.

“I had no idea what I was going to do,” Darrah recalls of the time surrounding his family’s business winding down. “Right around the same time, my sewage system backed up in my yard.” Feeling determined to rise to the challenge, he devoted his time to learning how it worked. In fact, Darrah soon realized he developed a passion for this unconventional industry.

“I always have had an interest in the way that things worked,” realizes Darrah. Over the next few weeks while his system was being fixed, he asked questions of the workers. “Why do you do it this way, as opposed to this? Or, how is checking this piece over here going to reflect back to this one over there? I asked a lot of questions—they were probably sick of me!”

Pictured above:
Brad Shade, Paul
Darrah, Larry Finkbiner,
Rick Steinman



Soon after developing the interest Amity Township advertised for an entry-level water treatment plant worker. Recognizing the open door, he took the job.

"I learned a lot on the job, but still felt after 6 years that there was so much more for me to learn," explains Darrah. "I felt like I needed to advance myself."

Darrah's colleagues introduced him to RACC's Wastewater Treatment Program. Most of them had only taken parts of the course, which offer a mix of workforce development and specialized learning showcasing the various methods and systems for treating wastewater. Darrah wanted to immerse himself in the full program from start to finish, so that he could learn as much as possible.

Mike Sassaman, an instructor for the program, recalls Darrah's drive to succeed. "It's really nice to see an up-and-coming individual like Paul who has been able to move up quickly, from having job experience, becoming licensed and now being a superintendent," shares Sassaman. He also points out that the currently-licensed plant operator workforce is aging, and that certification

programs like that at RACC are a necessity for employers looking for skilled workers. "We have a lot of students coming through this program and gaining their licenses and going on to become superintendents at nearby plants, including Sinking Spring, Reading and Wyomissing."

While preparing to earn his license, Darrah heard about a job opening at Spring Township. The interview process was more like a test, evaluating his knowledge of various systems, best practices and troubleshooting. "I knew everything! I received a perfect score," proudly shares Darrah. "The only way I scored as highly as I did was thanks to the Wastewater Treatment Program at RACC." Darrah graduated from the class in May, 2014 and started work at the Spring Township facility soon after in June. "Out of 50 applicants, I was chosen because they were so impressed with what I had learned through the Wastewater Treatment Program."

The following year, he was selected for a promotion at work. "My ability to adapt to situations and understand a lot of the different systems in play helped me to go further than I ever thought I would be able to," admits

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Darrah. As he moved into his new role, another RACC student, Brad Shade, was ready to step in. He also took advantage of the entire training program and equally impressed his interviewers. Darrah and Shade paved the way for others through their knowledge and proven work ethic. Larry Finkbiner was next in the queue. In addition to completing half of RACC's course, Finkbiner's prior experience working at Bear Creek allowed him to qualify for a higher paying job at the Spring Township facility.

Last but of course not least, another graduate of the program, Rick Steinman, secured a position at the Spring Township facility in January of this year. "I needed a change of pace. I had worked for a number of years in another related field, testing water samples, but needed something different. The program at RACC allowed me to progress," vouches Steinman. The Wastewater Dream Team is complete. For now.

Pictured: Spring Township Wastewater Treatment Plant above and bottom left, GapVax Wastewater Truck, bottom right

