

We had a great visit at the Pinellas Science Center to start off 2012. This included tour of the MOST van. The Science Center is one of Pinellas County's best-kept secrets. But Joe Cuenco and his staff are doing their best to change that. They have a great set of relationships with some key partners including St. Pete College, Raytheon, and Bay News 9. Their partnership now includes F MEP and over the next few months they will develop a capability similar to that of the MOST Van. Their focus is shifting to elementary and middle school students and their plan is to introduce them to hands-on opportunities that will bolster their science, technology, engineering, and math skills (STEM). The objective, along with their current programs, is to get youth interested in careers including manufacturing.

Their current core capabilities include a planetarium, a variety of telescopes, meteorology lab, a video production lab, and a variety of hands-on activities. With Raytheon and SPC they have a full-scale Cyber Security lab. This lab train students in the science behind cyber attacks. Graduates receive various professional certifications that they have for life. They've had graduates as young as ninth-grade. SPC then offers courses leading to associate's and bachelor degrees. Raytheon then will provide continuing education leading to Masters and doctorate level degrees for qualified candidates. Cyber warfare is an important part of modern business. This will be the topic of our February meeting.

Joe told the story of a fourth-grader working in their Lego robotics program. Each student builds a workable robot out of Legos. It contains a brick that will take voice as well as other commands. Joe was particularly impressed by the product of this fourth-grader and he asked, "You are very good at this, have you ever built a robot before?" "Yes", responded the student. Joe said, "How long have you been doing this?" The student replied, "Since yesterday". Their impact on developing our future work workforce will be significant, especially with this new partnership with F MEP.

Our visit to the MOST Van was on the day prior to graduation of the first-class in 2012. There were a dozen students eager to graduate. Most were from Nautical Structures and there was one from Paragon. Patrick Baymont told us that the van boasts a 98% graduation rate and over 85% of the graduates remain on the job after six months. This program provides employers with employee's equivalent to 90 day O.J. T's. The program also relieves the potential employer of the arduous employee screening process and all this is done at no cost. If you are thinking about hiring, contact F MEP. One of this classes graduate's has already been notified they will be flown by Nautical Structures to Atlanta for follow-on training in lasers immediately after graduation. This individual had never worked in manufacturing and came from a sales background. It is an impressive statement for the quality of training received.

F MEP and the Tampa Workforce Alliance have funding to train up to 60 new employees using the MOST Van within the next 90 days. The only criterion is that the employees must be Hillsborough County residents. This opportunity is open to all Upper Tampa Bay manufacturers. The chamber will be working with F MEP to secure a broader partnership with Hillsborough County economic development and the city of Tampa on this program. If you have any hiring needs please contact Patrick Baymont or Christopher Astolfi. Can you afford not to try this out?