

Charting a Course

By Shawnda Schelinder
Photos by Marie Ketring

Marine Repair Technician grads find the skills to map their own futures

With a highly specialized degree like marine repair technician (MRT), one might assume the career field would be narrowly defined as well. But, as these Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College graduates demonstrate, there are plenty of opportunities in the sea.

For MRT graduate Steve Witt, his degree took him to one of the most scenic locations on Lake Superior. Witt, a marine machinery technician for the National Park Service, punches the clock at Roy's Point, just north of Bayfield, Wis.

Although Witt's family had owned a sports recreation shop in the region, he wasn't sure if that was the field for him.

"I got out of the military and didn't quite know what I wanted to do," Witt says. "So I took an aptitude test through the VA and it

kind of placed me a little higher on the mechanic side. And they said there's a great program at WITC in Ashland."

Starting out, Witt admits he didn't know much about the marine industry. Throughout the course of the program, he learned

everything instructors Tim Edwards and Todd Larson could teach, from bow to stern. "I absorbed it like a sponge, I guess," he says.

Part of the curriculum at that time included an internship, which Witt served with the National Park Service.

"I worked one full summer here at the park," Witt says. "And I kind of figured that's what I'd like to do. I got hired back after I graduated to work on the grounds and trails and assist the marine mechanic at the time here." When the former machinery technician suffered a sudden heart attack, Witt stepped up to fill the position.

Now an average day for Witt is anything but average. From maintaining a fleet of 14 boats to performing routine maintenance on all of the lawnmowers, generators and other machinery, each day is different, which Witt

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appreciates. Being on the shores of Lake Superior is an added bonus.

Across the bay on the southern shores of Lake Superior, Chad Buckmaster's story is not so dissimilar from Witt's. Aside from the fact that both young men graduated from the MRT program in 2005, Buckmaster, like Witt, wasn't entirely sure of his path when he applied to the MRT program. Nor did he know much about the marine field.

"I entered it when I was 25 years old," says Buckmaster. "I needed a life change. I was starting a family, and I needed to get a real job, something I enjoyed doing."

"Actually I started the class knowing nothing about marine," Buckmaster admits. "Then I graduated knowing almost everything I could possibly need to know."

After graduation, Buckmaster worked for a couple different recreational equipment repair shops in the region. But his career goals changed course when his childhood friend lost his job in 2009.

When Darren Hudson was laid off, he and Buckmaster decided to open their own business. Hudson had graduated from Century College in Staples, Minn., from its construction and forestry John Deere program. He had also completed a welding course at WITC-Ashland. So a shop that specialized in servicing recreational equipment seemed like a good fit.

"We put our heads together and figured in our lifetimes it's either now or never

because we were both starting our families," Hudson says.

Hudson set about securing federal and state grants and a small business loan from the City of Ashland. In September 2010, Hudbuck's 4 Season Repair opened its doors on Highway 2 in Ashland.

The two had built the business from the ground up, and the first year wasn't easy.

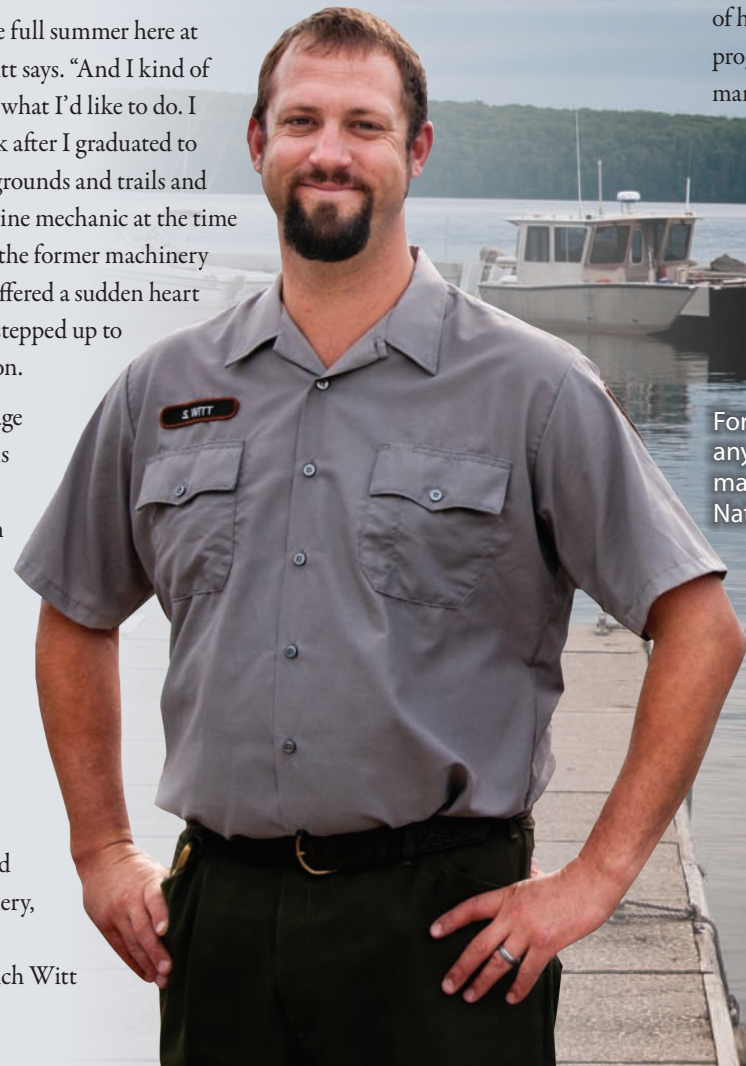
"Are we going to close the doors or are we going to get some customers? That's what it was. It was kind of scary," Hudson admits. But a year out of the gate and the business is still in the black. Buckmaster and Hudson enjoy the work and take pride in their business.

Both Witt and Buckmaster credit WITC's MRT program for opening doors that they never knew existed. Although the training was specific, it provided them with the skills to take their knowledge a step further and ultimately to successful careers. ■

Chad Buckmaster thanks WITC's instructors for teaching him the skills and techniques he needed to create a successful business.



For Steve Witt, an average day is anything but average as a marine machinery technician for the National Parks Service.



WITC-Ashland's Marine Repair Technician program is unique in the state of Wisconsin. Its three-semester program provides students with hands-on skills with two- and four-cycle gasoline engines, drive systems, transmissions, fiberglass boat hulls, electrical systems, and consumer-supplied products. Courses are taught in a 6,000-square foot lab featuring the most up-to-date equipment including EFI and direct injection engines. Students participate in off-site training at local marinas and dealerships and gain actual service experience through community-supplied projects. The program is a member of the American Boat and Yacht Council (ABYC) and the Association of Marine Technicians (AMTECH).

To learn more about the Marine Repair Technician program, visit witic.edu/pgmpages/marinetech or call 800.243.9482.