

RENEWED. Opportunity

A layoff and several unsuccessful attempts at college did not deter Matt Underdahl

By Allison Iacone

Photos by Allison Iacone and Dean Vogtman



When one door closes, another one opens. That's more than just the writing on a motivational poster. For WITC-Superior building performance technician student Matt Underdahl, it describes his life.

Underdahl was a seat assembler at Polaris Industries in Osceola, Wis., in 2010 when the company announced plans to shutter the plant. He'd been on the payroll just six months. That announcement would dramatically change more than 500 lives, including Underdahl's. It wasn't long before he realized that change would be for the better.

Because Polaris was moving jobs out of the country, Underdahl and other employees qualified for federal worker retraining under a program called Trade Adjustment Assistance. In short, the program extends unemployment and covers education costs for displaced workers. That news meant Underdahl was going back to school.

He was, as he put it, about to get his "do over."

Underdahl had tried college before, twice in fact. Right after graduating from high school in Forest Lake, Minn., he enrolled in a technical college close to home. He found it wasn't a good fit. The second time, he attended a two-year business college, majoring in music business. He described it as a "terrible program for my future" and never completed that degree.

"This gave me the opportunity to go back to school and get an education in something I could make a career out of," says Underdahl. "I refused to fail this time."

He found what he was looking for in the building performance technician program (formerly energy efficiency technician) at WITC-Superior.

"The program focused on green concepts. I think the world is moving

in that direction, and I have building construction experience – so I thought it would be a great fit," Underdahl says.

Underdahl moved to Superior and enrolled in the program in the fall of 2011. While earning his associate degree is Underdahl's main goal, there's another side to college life he's determined to experience on this time around. Among other activities, Underdahl is a delegate of the Student Senate, member of the Campus Activities Board and founding member and treasurer of the program club for building performance technician students.

performance technician students are making the most of it.

"We have this amazing opportunity to get real experience updating [the lab house] with the latest in energy efficiency standards," says Underdahl. "If we make a mistake, we're not doing that to somebody's home. This is our chance to learn to do it right. That's the type of experience you can't get just anywhere."

Current building performance technician students will spend the year transforming the lab house, which was a tax-forfeited property purchased for \$1. When the house is completed, it

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– Matt Underdahl

All that, and he currently maintains a 4.0 grade point average.

"I was really impressed when I found out that he had researched various programs and decided to move up to Superior to enter this program. Matt is a student who is focused, dedicated and excited about learning through new experiences," says Duane Lasley, building performance technician program instructor. "He's like the Energizer Bunny. He never quits."

Lasley's work with Underdahl extends beyond the classroom. In the spring of 2012, the building performance technician program acquired a lab house, an off-site, hands-on learning environment for students. It's a first for WITC. Underdahl and fellow building

will be sold and returned to the tax base for Douglas County. If all goes according to plan, the house will get renewed purpose as a family home. It's the sort of fresh start that Underdahl, himself, sees for his future.

"I hope to either start my own energy auditing business or get a full-time job as an energy analyst for a company with experience in this field," says Underdahl. "Basically, I just want a secure job and career for the future, and I think this degree will provide me with the education to accomplish that."

For more information about the building performance technician program, visit witc.edu, key word search: building performance. ■