

Proving His Dad RIGHT

How Stew Melander exceeded even his own expectations

Story and Photos by Jena Vogtman

Call it the cliché “American Dream” if you want, but it’s an accomplishment to many to have a well-paying job, own their own home and be married with two children. Stewart (Stew) Melander did this before age 24.

“I honestly didn’t expect I’d be here,” he says. What Melander did know is that his career would be very different than his father’s.

While his father, Doug, suits-up local businessmen in custom-fit, crisp clothes at Mainstream Fashions for Men in downtown Duluth, Melander and his brother, Phillip, chose careers requiring a lot of grease – and not the kind you put in your hair – not to mention the other accessories: hard hats, coveralls, steel-toe boots, goggles and earplugs.



“He always knew that we were a little different from him, and he embraced what we wanted to do,” says Melander.

Doug was on board because he says his sons are in a hot industry, adding he finds it amazing high school counselors are pushing four-year degrees to the masses, when more and more jobs are opening up in technical, two-year degree fields.

Today, Melander and his brother both work for Cliffs Natural Resources in Silver Bay, Minn., at the Northshore Mining facility. His duties involve maintaining the concentrator, which pulverizes rock, separates out the iron and turns it into slurry.

Getting there started in the family’s Duluth garage.

“I always had a bunch of lawn mowers and dirt bikes at home,” says Melander, describing how he taught himself about small engines, spending hours tinkering around with parts.

He excelled in automotive classes in high school through the Secondary Technical Center, graduating from Central in 2007, but it was while applying those skills he had a realization.

“Working on cars is not where I wanted to be,” says Melander, noting he personally wanted something else out of his career.

Melander turned to the Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College industrial maintenance technician program in Superior under instructor Steve Miller with an idea of the size of paycheck he could get after completing it.

“Stew Melander was a great team member, who enjoyed putting his hands to work on all the mechanical and electrical projects he has encountered in the two years at WITC,” says Miller.

For Melander, it paid off.

“The skills he mastered helped jumpstart his career at Northshore Mining,” says Miller.

Melander says it was Miller who mentioned Cliffs Natural Resources might be a good fit, because it’s an industry where positions are opening up due to an aging workforce. Melander had to go through testing to get into the company.

“I felt that I was a little more prepared on the technical side than the others,” said Melander. “Now, about 90 percent of

the program, I’m using in my day-to-day work.”

He quickly gained a reputation.

“Stew is an awesome, hardworking problem solver,” says Ryan Christianson, Melander’s supervisor.

Melander acknowledges he’s in a good position for his age, already making enough to allow his wife to stay home with their kids, and his student loans are taken care of, a feat many of his peers are just beginning.

“A lot of people I know are still working mid-level jobs and paying off huge loans,” he says. “What I got out of my education was well worth it.”

His dad says he’s proud watching his sons excel and move up the ranks. For Melander, his success is a simple equation.

“If you find something you really like, you’re going to strive to excel at it,” says Melander. “A solid two years is going to take you pretty far.” ■

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Industrial Maintenance Technician

Offered at WITC’s Superior campus, the industrial maintenance technician program has everything under one degree. This two-year technical program offers broad-based skills and practical hands-on experience in welding, hydraulics, electricity, mechanical maintenance, maintenance machining and programmable logic controller (PLC) maintenance. Students will learn how to troubleshoot, repair, install, and maintain industrial systems to engineering and industry standards. For more information, visit witc.edu/programs.