

## Hands-on jobs gain appreciation in economic downturn

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Mike "Remus" Patterson feels a sense of awe when he walks into the Capitol Visitor Center in Washington, D.C.



Courtesy of the International Masonry Institute

At The Flynn Center, an International Masonry Institute training facility in Bowie, future stonemasons David McCotter, left, and Tyler Smith, right, learn job skills such as the anchoring system for stone veneer panels.

Before the building opened to the public last December, Patterson, an Annapolis resident and a third-year stonemason apprentice, worked with a company that spent about two years on the project, laying the granite, Tennessee marble, limestone and sandstone that decks the 580,000-square-foot facility.

That tangible outcome is what he said he enjoys the most about his blue-collar job. "I don't know, just being able to end a day and see what you've finished and know that it's going to be there even after you're gone," he said.

In a time when big bonuses and bailouts have sullied the reputation of white-collar America, manual laborers - those whose jobs are at times thought of merely as dirty and gritty - are being praised for their all-American work ethic.

They are mechanics, ironworkers, welders, bricklayers. The men and women in hard hats, gloves and boots.

And though careers like these - with work that literally gets under one's fingernails - aren't necessarily booming in popularity, they resonate with many who are nostalgic for a time when the labor of the American workforce just felt more honest.

Patterson, whose father calls him by his middle name, Remus, because they share the same first and last name, is following in his father's footsteps. His father, Mike Lee Patterson, still works as a stonemason.

The field of bricklaying and masonry is often passed down over generations. Patterson's great-grandfather, his grandmother's father, also was a stonemason. He, too, cut rock with a hammer and chisel, hoisted the large and heavy rock pieces, and aligned them in beds of mortar.

Patterson, 25, hadn't always planned to take on the family trade. For a while he studied business at Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, but the lecture hall just wasn't quite his scene. So he went back to what he knew. "I just kind of fell into it," Patterson said. "I was broke and needed money, and it was something I was familiar with. I had been around masonry my whole life."

As a boy, he used to help his dad with side jobs, doing a little bit of block work and a lot of granite kitchen countertops. "I've been doing it forever. I guess it's just kind of second nature now," he said.

Others who know him and have watched him work say he's pretty darn good at it, too. He has received training from the International Masonry Institute, which is headquartered in Annapolis and has a training center in Bowie, and he'll be a competitor in the International Apprenticeship Contest sponsored by the IMI later this month. He plans to continue masonry for the rest of his career, he said.

Patterson and his father are members of the local Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers union. Franco DiValentin, who works for the union on the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee, said despite sometimes negative views of blue-collar trades, he himself has made a good living, as have many other masons in this region.

Many of the unionized professionals make about \$32 per hour, he said.

According to state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation statistics, there are slightly more than 4,000 brickmasons and blockmasons in Maryland. Of those bricklayers, a little less than 900 specialize in stone.

Over the next decade, officials estimate the market will gain just 900 more jobs in masonry. But DiValentin said there will always be a demand for it, especially in and around the nation's capital.

"It's relatively slow right now, but the majority of our members have stayed gainfully employed. A lot of our work is done within (Washington, D.C.) - a lot of government funding attached to it," he said.

To be sure, many U.S. workers have traded in their calluses for cubicles over the years, but all is not lost for the vocational arts. In fact, Ronald Alberico, principal of the Center of Applied Technology-South in Edgewater, said training for many of these hands-on trades is alive and well at his school, which teaches classes to high-school-aged students from six feeder schools in Anne Arundel County.

CAT-South offers myriad courses, from contemporary choices like dental assistance and computer technology to the more traditional shop classes like auto mechanics, welding and building construction.

Alberico said enrollment numbers have been consistent over the past few years, holding steady between 850 and 900 teens. He attributes the school's success in drawing students to steady recruiting techniques, including a summer camp program for middle-school youth.

"These students enjoy coming here," Alberico said. "Sitting in a classroom all period is a long time. Here, they get up, they move around, they work at different stations - there's a lot of activity."

There's also a lot of pride in the type of work the nation marks tomorrow: the manual labor of folks like Patterson and DiValentin.

"There's immediate gratification when working with your hands - something that you can see and feel," DiValentin said.