

From Dim Prospects to a Bright Future

How Justin Palavra’s life was changed by intervention, education, opportunity – and a Computer Numerical Control machine.

“Unforgiving” is how Justin Palavra describes the CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine he operates at work. Just a few years ago, it’s a word that might have applied to the path he was following – a path that was almost sure to be a dead end. But a young man of Justin’s caliber deserves to reach his potential. Whether written by luck or fate, this is the story of how Justin Palavra’s path was detoured by three stepping-stones.

The first stepping-stone was Rhonda Price, who founded “Man Up,” a lifeline organization for young men who want to turn their lives around, but face a stunning array of obstacles. Over 20 years of experience in RI’s court system gave Rhonda the intuition to spot a diamond in the rough like Justin, who had been recruited by Providence Country Day School for his basketball skills (he’s 6 ft., 7 in.) *and* his academic excellence. Price first saw him shooting baskets at a community center where she served as Executive Director. Justin listened to her plans for the “Man Up” program, but that’s where it ended. “When you’re ready to man up,” she told him, “let me know.”

Less than a year later, that’s exactly what Justin did. “That was a happy day!” Rhonda recalls. “Justin was ready. I knew right from the start which program I wanted to match him with. New England Tech would be a perfect fit.”

The next stepping-stone was SAMI – the Ship Building and Marine Advanced Manufacturing Institute at New England Tech, funded by the US Department of Labor, the Governor’s Workforce Board, and the RI Foundation. Fred Santaniello is at the helm of this incredible program, which takes unemployed Rhode Islanders through an intense regimen of hands-on and classroom education. “They enter the job market as skilled welders and machinists, fully qualified to hit the ground running,” says Santaniello. “In fact, 90% of our graduates are working, not just for big companies like Electric Boat, but for so many smaller shops who are desperate for skilled people.”

What was his first impression of Justin? “He was likeable. And pretty soon, we found out that he’s really smart and picks up quickly. I was very straightforward with him, and made sure he knew what a huge opportunity he was being given.” Santaniello speaks like a proud father. “Justin got it.”

The SAMI curriculum exposes students to both the Welding and Machinist programs, to help them make more informed career choices. Justin initially entered SAMI’s Welding Program, but soon felt drawn to the Machinist Program. “Everything you look at has to do with machinery,” he says. “Every job is different. Even the beginning stages of evaluating a job aren’t boring. You have to use lots of different skills – including math.” After eight weeks of enthusiastic participation, Justin completed the training. “I loved going through the SAMI program. I gave it my all.”

The third stepping-stone in Justin’s path is named John Lombari, owner of Rhode Island Carbide in Smithfield. John has grown this 55-year-old company despite hard economic times, and employs over 25 people. Companies like his are a perfect match for the employment-specific skills taught in the SAMI program. When Justin was matched to RI Carbide by Fred Santaniello, Lombari could see the potential immediately. “He’s always got his head in the job,” says John, who has become more of a mentor to Justin than an employer.

“I found out that Justin was getting up at 4 am, taking a bus into Providence, another bus to Smithfield, and then walking the last two miles, all to be at work for 6!” he remembers. “No way could we let that continue, so we started picking him up in the morning.” In the last few months, Lombari has made it possible for Justin to buy a car. “He’s never let me down,” says the boss. “Justin is a good investment.”

And so Justin Palavra is now on track to a satisfying and stable career, earning an hourly rate in the high teens, and plans on returning to New England Tech to earn a degree. His success story is one of so many featuring SAMI graduates – and New England Tech is proud to provide employers with such bright and qualified candidates.

Justin’s appreciation for the gifts he’s been given is clear. He refers to the Man Up program as “a brotherhood,” and is scheduled to become a member of its Board of Directors! He loves working at RI Carbide, listening and learning from the experiences of the seasoned machinists around him. He looks back on his training with the SAMI program as a turning point.

“I couldn’t really tell you where I’d be without that opportunity at New England Tech,” he says. “I feel so happy to have found something I love to do, something I can make a career out of. They told me it had the potential to change my life – and they were right.”

Find out more about the many programs offered by the Center for Technology and Industry at New England Tech. Call (401) 739-5000.



Justin Palavra operates a CNC lathe at Rhode Island Carbide in Smithfield, RI