

STUDENTS

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with the CREAT Foundation and the Skills Foundation Governor's Discretionary Grant. She assists both students at Alcorn Central High School and the Alcorn Career and Technology Center. Taylor Johnson is the district's other career coach and helps students at Kossuth High School and Biggersville High School.

Lewis had knowledge of an apprentice program at hago Automotive located in Tishomingo County's Yellow Creek Port.

The successful German company – and yes, it's a small "h" in the name – primarily makes parts for automotive company BMW, but supplies to other auto makers in the United States as well.

hago Automotive CEO Alfred Geiger is a product of the common apprenticeship programs offered in Germany. Although he earned a college degree in mechanical engineering, Geiger some 30 years later credits the apprenticeship program where he became a tool and die maker that gave him the knowledge and experience necessary for a successful career.

Now Geiger, other hago Automotive leaders, Lewis, Johnson and many area vocational-technical educators on both the high school and community college level are not only getting the word out on the hago apprenticeship program, but encourage other area industries to do the same.

"The question is not, 'what if we train our people and they leave?', Geiger told the Career Coach. "It is, 'what if we don't train our people and they stay?'"

Although retired, Lewis jumped at the chance to be the new career coach.

Her first day on the job, she took a tour of hago.

"I knew I could help with the void between a student and the need for skilled workers," she said. "And I have a good relationship with the community and the students."

She recently took seven young ACHS men on a tour of hago to learn more about



A hago Automotive employee shows Alcorn Central High School students Peyton Harvell and A.J. Robbins the tool and die operation at the hago facility located in Yellow Creek Port. Leading the plant tour (right) is hago Automotive COO David Quigley.

the industry, what it does, skills necessary to land a job there and gather information on the available internships.

"I knew their apprentice program was second to none," said Lewis.

What the students learned was valuable, perhaps life-changing.

"We have an increased future need of highly trained technicians to design and maintain the ever increasing technology required to compete in the global market," Geiger told the students, mostly seniors. "To develop these technicians, we need to invest in our youth and give them the opportunity to gain hands-on training in addition to academic education."

"Our dual education program is designed to provide this type of training," he said.

Young men and women who join hago's apprenticeships enroll in a technical program at Northeast Mississippi Community College and begin work in that same field at the hago facility, shared the CEO.

"hago will cover all college costs such as tuition and also pays for all hours worked at the plant," said Geiger.

The four-year program allows enough time for the apprentices to learn and "delve deeply into the daily challenges in the field of

their interest to develop into a top notch technician" and eventually earn a nationally accredited apprenticeship certificate, said Geiger.

Students saw firsthand hago's tool and die operation and also talked with hago COO David Quigley, said Lewis.

Those who have worked with Lewis over the years or have been a student, know the educator likes to see results.

ACHS seniors Jacob Tucker and A.J. Robbins have applied for the hago apprenticeship, said Lewis, and a third student has expressed interest, but can't enroll just yet because he is a junior.

Tucker is thinking about a career in industrial maintenance, said Lewis. "He likes the idea of learning about the machinery which keeps industry in business."

Replied Tucker, "It's a great opportunity."

Interested young men like Tucker remain a perfect fit for hago's program, said Geiger.

"This program provides an immediate benefit to students," said the hago CEO. "We offer free college and pay while they work so they can not only avoid college debt, but they can earn money and knowledge at the same time."

More importantly, said Geiger, there is a "bigger picture."

"There are also benefits to

our community, the place we call home," he said. "By offering the training needed to provide a money-secure future, we are able to keep our youth in our community, put the investment we made into our youth to work, reap the benefit of a stable tax base, attract new high tech projects, attract companies that are looking for a solid base of skilled trades and give our rural community a chance to grow and offer more attractive opportunities."

This is music the new career coach likes to sing.

Lewis seeks more industry to step forward and help place students with good-paying careers right here at home.

"We will continue to tour industries and see what they need," she said, as a meeting is already in motion at Northeast with industry leaders, educators and economic development resources such as The Alliance.

Lewis and Geiger both remain optimistic.

"I deeply believe this is the future – of not only hago – but any manufacturing company," added Geiger. "Especially in more rural areas like ours."

(To obtain more information to bridge the gap between students and careers, contact Alcorn School District Career Coach Rebecca Lewis at rlewis@alcornschools.org or 662-286-8720, extension 2034.)