Students from Ben Franklin see history take flight

A visit to the city's Leonardo aircraft plant also reveals a world of career possibilities.

by Darryl C. Murphy

Lauren Slepian, Leonardo

Benjamin Franklin High School students get a look at an MH139 prototype. The project is a collaboration between Leonardo and Boeing. The aircraft is being proposed as a replacement for the Air Force's Huey helicopter fleet.
Last week, Benjamin Franklin High School students witnessed history in the making.

Eighteen students from the school’s Advanced Manufacturing & Technology program toured the helicopter division of Leonardo, a company based in Italy that specializes in aerospace, defense, and security, and saw the prototype of the first new helicopter type in 50 years.

The AW609 Tiltrotor is the first commercial aircraft designed to act as a hybrid of a helicopter and an airplane. It is being built right here in Philadelphia, and the students from Ben Franklin were quite impressed with what they saw. Some even started considering a future at the company.

“I am thinking about all of the possibilities,” said Richmond Hamilton, a sophomore in Ben Franklin’s Computer-Aided Drafting & Design program. “I can see myself down there working.”

The field trip was organized by the city’s Chamber of Commerce and Ben Franklin High School to celebrate Manufacturing Month in Philadelphia. With the trip, state and city officials hope to raise awareness of the local career opportunities awaiting students.

“There’s a whole bunch of facilities here in the Northeast that a lot of people don’t even realize are here in the city of Philadelphia,” said State Rep. Martina White, a Republican who represents Northeast Philadelphia. “And that’s what’s cool about it. We’re like a hidden treasure of jobs.”

The Northeast is home to businesses such as Penn Maid, specializing in dairy products, Herr Foods, Pepsi Bottling Co., and more.

Heloise Jeftison, director of talent and development for the chamber of commerce, said trips such as these “are part of an effort to make sure there are pipelines and career pathways for our young people in all different professions that have never been open before.”

During the tour, which took a little over an hour, students were taken from one facility to the next, learning about how different model aircraft are assembled and tested.

Harry Graham, the welding teacher at Ben Franklin, said students were selected for the trip based on their grades, attendance, and behavior. But the criteria weren’t just about ensuring good conduct in the facility that builds multimillion-dollar aircraft. Graham said that he and teachers of the manufacturing programs place a heavy emphasis on developing students’ soft skills.

“Every student is not the brightest,” he said. “But if they have the best attitude, then the right employer can make them a good employee, because they have what it takes. They may not be the fastest, but you can teach them to be the fastest. Soft skills, you either have them or you don’t.”

Also, in light of the recent announcement that Ben Franklin will be welcoming Science Leadership Academy into its building, computer-aided design teacher Peter McDermott said that the faculty from both schools had been meeting and working to make sure the transition “goes as smooth as possible,” while keeping Ben Franklin students motivated for the world that awaits them.
“Yes, they have kids that are extremely smart,” said McDermott. “Yes, they have kids that have great infrastructure behind them with parents and support. And some of the kids at Ben Franklin don’t have that, and that’s where the staff has to step up even more and give them that guidance and provide leadership to these kids and let them know with trips like this that there are opportunities out there. There are opportunities in the city of Philadelphia. The world is theirs; they have to go grab it.”

Kim Pearsig, senior manager of external relations and communications at Leonardo, reinforced that message when she told the students what it takes to succeed there.

She, too, stressed the importance of soft skills and leadership. “If you have the passion, your people skills are all going to serve you,” she said.

“If a problem arises and your skills are such that you can get the best out of your [team members] ... that makes you a leader. That’s the type of person we look for here.”

As the group left the facility, Hamilton said that Pearsig’s words inspired him to “step it up a couple flights of stairs” and that he is up for the challenge of working hard.

“I’m just in awe,” he said. “I see myself here. This is where I want to be, at least for a start. This is where I am going to be.”

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