

Inaugural SVCC class launches students into 'higher education'



The inaugural Power Line Worker Training School class includes (from left), in front of truck, instructor Clyde Robertson, Luke Storey, Will Jordan, Jackie Lewis Jr., Kevin Dalton, Derek Staton, Matthew Cox, Cameron Gibbs, Joseph Anthony Jr., instructor Brad Wike; and on truck, Robert Parlante and Lewis Carwile. Not pictured is Josh Crenshaw.

Students in the inaugural class of Southside Virginia Community College's (SVCC) new Power Line Worker Training School have finished the first phase of their higher education.

Literally.

Class members, who completed the course May 12, spent most of the 11-week session at a higher level than most folks — specifically, working and learning at the top of 40- to 65-foot utility poles.

Upon completing the course, the students earned numerous credentials and certifications, including a Power Line Worker credential from the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER), a nationally recognized training and credentialing program for the building trades.

The SVCC students also earned a commercial driver's license, CPR certification and an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) card. These and other earned credentials give the 11 graduates a

distinct "leg up" in competing for electric line-worker positions.

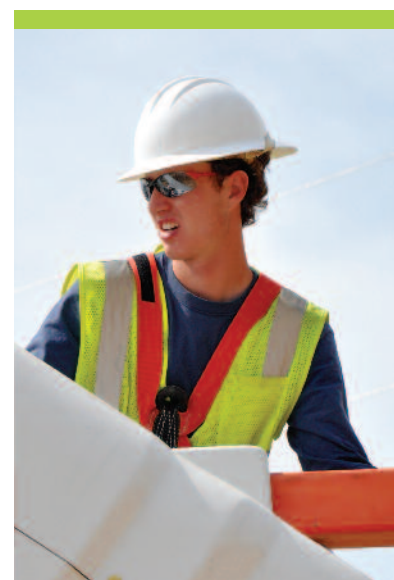
The concept for a power line-worker training school was born of necessity. With an aging line-worker corps, there is a looming shortage of skilled electric-utility line workers.

FROM CONCEPT TO CLASS IN LESS THAN A YEAR

This first graduating class is the culmination of an effort that began in April 2015 and was spearheaded by a variety of agencies and organizations, including Virginia's consumer-owned electric cooperatives.

A grant from the Virginia Community College System's Equipment Trust Fund provided seed money to begin planning the Power Line Worker Training Program at SVCC's Occupational/Technical Training Center, located at Pickett Park, site of former U.S. Army base Fort Pickett near Blackstone.

And the Power Line Worker Training Program was one of five successful entries



Learning to operate bucket trucks and other equipment is part of the Power Line Worker Training School instruction.

in the first Governor's Competition for Talent Solutions, announced last fall. The school benefited from a \$200,000 matching incentive grant intended to provide new workforce-training options and develop the state's rural economy as part of the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative.

To these grants, Virginia's electric cooperatives contributed additional funding, material and expertise to get the school started. It went from concept to class in less than 12 months, with the initial class members beginning their training on March 1.

Lead instructor for the inaugural course was Clyde Robertson, a retired line worker with more than 41 years of experience working for Southside Electric Cooperative. He was assisted by Brad Wike, also a retired line worker with experience in a variety of electric-utility areas from transmission-line work to helicopter-assisted line work.

"This program has been an excellent way to introduce the students to power-line work," notes Robertson. "Being a line worker really isn't so much a job as a lifestyle, and that's one of the ideas we emphasized early on — that, and the fact that because of the danger involved, this is very serious business and safety always has to come first."

The inaugural class showed great initiative and enthusiasm. "The first day of class, after the core curriculum, we went outside," notes Robertson. "The students were itching to climb. So we went out to the playground (the pole-climbing field) and told them to try climbing 4 to 5 feet. In a short time, they were all at the top of the 40-foot poles."

The students were highly motivated, Robertson adds. "Brad and I could give them an idea and they would take off with it. They learned electrical theory, how to build and repair lines, set poles, change transformers, hang reclosers, pull guy wire — all the basics they need to do the job."

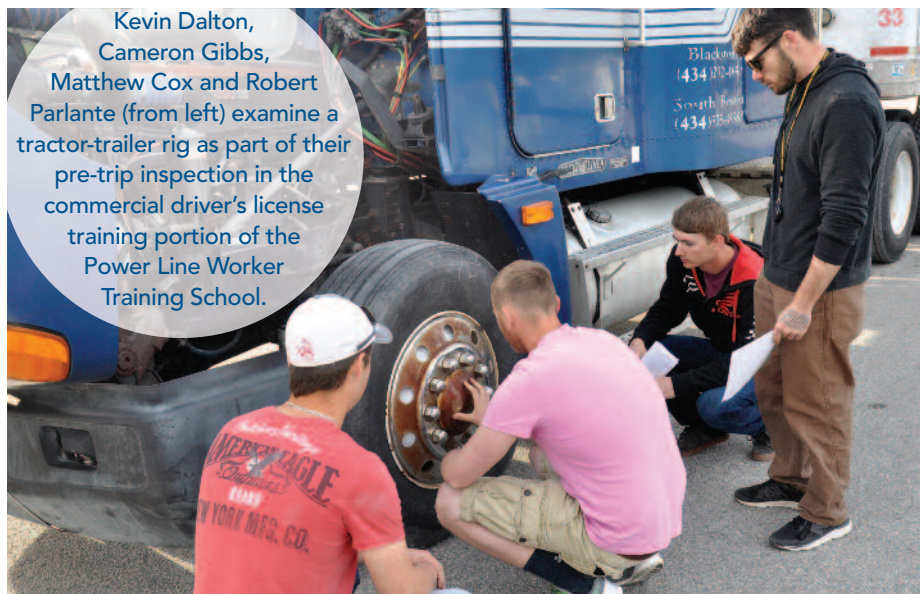
The students even conceived of a superb practical scenario where they were called out of bed at 3 a.m. to do a nighttime circuit repair following a simulated storm outage. "I went and cut the lines they had built that day and draped a large tree limb over part of the circuit to simulate the damage," notes Robertson. "Then the students got the call, came out to the site and did the repairs, just like they would if they were on the job." Such practical exercises teach in a way books and classroom instruction sometimes don't. For example, Robertson says his students learned to always have cold-weather clothing on hand, as the night-outage



TOP: The Power Line Worker Training School sign in front of the "playground," the field of utility poles on which students learn electric line-worker skills.

RIGHT: Josh Crenshaw (left) and Lewis Carwile work on a double cross-arm as part of their line-construction training.

BELOW: All eyes skyward – Instructor Clyde Robertson and students Derek Staton, Will Jordan, Jackie Lewis Jr. and Luke Storey (from left) watch the progress of a cross-arm repair job.



Kevin Dalton, Cameron Gibbs, Matthew Cox and Robert Parlante (from left) examine a tractor-trailer rig as part of their pre-trip inspection in the commercial driver's license training portion of the Power Line Worker Training School.



Jackie Lewis Jr. practices pulling conductor in a circuit-construction exercise.



Joseph Anthony Jr. practices climbing skills. Climbing and working from their hooks were favorite activities of the students.



After a work exercise, instructors Brad Wike and Clyde Robertson (right) review the job with (from left) students Derek Staton, Will Jordan and Lewis Carwile.

exercise took place on a night in April when the temperature was in the 40s.

"The class went better than I anticipated it might when we first started," Robertson adds. "This really is a great bunch of students."

And the feeling is mutual.

"It's been fantastic, and we have a great instructor," says student Lewis Carwile, from Charlotte County. "I'd definitely recommend this class and already have. Two friends I've talked with will be in the next class."

"Clyde has been an excellent instructor. He'll push you, but he lets you learn at your own pace, and he lets you learn from your mistakes," adds Matthew Cox, a Powhatan resident.

Robert Parlante of Blackstone says, "Clyde's been a good teacher. He let us learn in a hands-on way, and that stays with you."

"This has been a great course," adds Chesterfield County's Luke Storey. "It's been a continuous, learn-as-you-go experience, and we've been able to get out of it what we put into it."

"There was something different every day," says Blackstone's Kevin Dalton. "We learned to climb, do transformer work, restore systems after damage. It was exciting. I like the heights."

All of the students said they enjoyed learning to climb. "Learning to climb was probably my favorite activity," says Clarksville's Derek Staton. "I was worried about that part of it at first, but by the end of the class climbing came easy."

"Learning to do everything off hooks was probably my favorite thing," adds Will Jordan of Louisa. "Working off the hooks on the pole, you learn to stretch out to get the job done. There's real art to it."

Blackstone's Joseph Anthony Jr. says, "This has been quite an experience. I wish it wasn't finished. I've really enjoyed getting to know and work with people from other areas. The bonding has been like a family. You have to trust the person working next to you and he has to trust you. You're literally in control of each other's lives."

COOPERATIVE EFFORT THROUGH AND THROUGH

Each of Virginia's 13 consumer-owned electric-distribution cooperatives played a role in making the SVCC school a reality. The two cooperatives nearest Pickett Park, Southside Electric Cooperative and Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, were actively involved in supplying the students with materials and expertise during the 11-week course.

"The SVCC Power Line Worker program provides a tremendous advantage for those who complete the curriculum. Upon graduation, students possess enhanced knowledge and nationally recognized workforce credentials that are extremely attractive to employers in the electric-utility industry," says Jeff Edwards, president and CEO of Southside Electric Cooperative.

Keith Harkins, vice president of workforce development and continuing education for SVCC, says, "This program is a fantastic example of a public/private partnership. Southside Virginia Community College is honored to partner with Virginia's electric cooperatives, and with the governor's office and the Virginia Community College System, and with many others, too, to make this program a reality. We are excited for the students who will learn skills leading to a rewarding career, and we are privileged to work with partners who recognize the value of training the future workforce."

John Lee, president and CEO of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, observes, "Working on the team that established this line-workers school has been one of the most gratifying experiences I've had in my personal or professional life. Early on, we identified a growing need for line workers and aggressively set out to address it.

"This school will play a critical role in replacing retiring line workers with candidates who are well trained and have a distinct advantage over other applicants because of the certification they will have earned here. These graduates will make a positive contribution to the electric-utility industry — and help ensure reliable electric service — for decades to come.

"There are many, many benefits for a number of stakeholders associated with this school ... but mostly what it represents is great opportunity for the Commonwealth, for electric utilities, and for hard-working kids who want an alternative career that's challenging, rewarding and serves the greater public good." ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

For information on upcoming Power Line Worker Training School sessions, contact Susan Early at susan.early@southside.edu or 434-292-3101; or visit www.southside.edu/content/power-line-worker-program.

The next class is slated to begin July 11 but is already full, according to the school. An autumn class scheduled to begin on Oct. 3 still has openings, however, and the spring 2017 class will begin on April 3.