

BUSINESS RESOURCES + TOOLS



Anthony Tosco, owner of Avanti Plumbing, Heating, and Cooling Inc.

124

Teachers, Mentors Take Note

The young eyes and minds are willing to learn.

BY JOHN VASTYAN

In the last column, I wrote about the importance of the nuclear family as the bedrock of our shared future, especially for today's young people. Yet, the definition of family has changed, good or bad.

Ultimately, for our young people — and especially those who hold promise for the future of our trade professions — there may be an ever-greater need for teachers or mentors to fill the widening gap, and to stir interest where the role of family members has diminished.

Ask yourself: could you help to improve the future outlook for young people? It doesn't have to be you as "teacher," and young people as "students."

You could simply be a guide. Consider, too, the possibility of coincidence — your inspiration to share, and another's openness to possibility.

Hey, it happened here

It wasn't long ago that I spoke with trade pro Anthony Tosco, owner of Avanti, Plumbing, Heating, and Cooling Inc. based in Audubon, Pennsylvania. He shared with me that he came into the trade as a real greenhorn. "It happened almost this abruptly: I woke up one morning

and decided that I wanted to try something new," he said. "Little did I know then how the path I'm on now would be so affected by some very special mentors. Heck, I didn't even know what 'hydronics' meant, and now it's both a passion and a profession."

Tosco entered the HVAC/hydronics and plumbing trade when he was 20. He'd been working for his father in the family pizza shop business, for what he says felt "like an eternity." He can remember waiting on customers at the age of 11.

One of the guys who frequented the restaurant was a fun guy, and who young Tosco knew took real pride in his work.

"He hired me, but boy what a culture shock. I went from working each day with pretty girls, to grunt work at a new construction jobsite, working alongside men who were, well, let's say — blunt. Man, did I feel out of place," added Tosco.

At heart, he knew he had entrepreneurial drive, but the inspiration simply lacked a steering wheel.

"I also knew that if I was to own a business, I'd need a good education and a master's license. So, I began my plumbing apprentice program," he

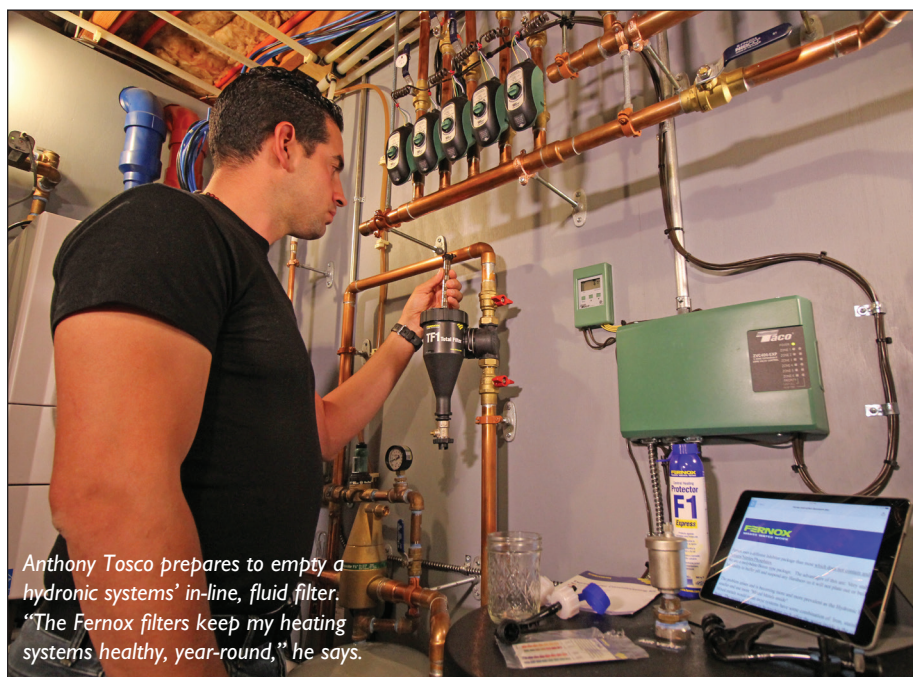
continued. "But still, for years, I felt out of place. I looked at things a little differently than my peers and didn't know many people in the trades. The recurring thought was to simply stay focused and move ahead — in Italian, that's the meaning of 'Avanti.' That became my theme, and ultimately the name of my enterprise."

Over the next few years, there were some tough lessons. Among them, he learned of the need to build and groom relationships with his customer base. He also decided that being a good plumber wasn't enough. He recognized the need to dive into air conditioning and hydronics. But how?

Local supply houses were always promoting their ability to train technicians for every type and variety of skill — from basic technology and installation or retrofit techniques to much more detailed, difficult work. I made the decision to take advantage of as many training opportunities as possible.

Chance encounter with his mentor

One encounter was a life-changer, and the beginning of a valuable, life-long mentorship. Tosco took a class led by Anthony Reikow, a trainer



Anthony Tosco prepares to empty a hydronic systems' in-line, fluid filter. "The Fernox filters keep my heating systems healthy, year-round," he says.

and hydronics expert with Bensalem, Pennsylvania-based B. J. Terroni Co., a manufacturer's rep firm.

"Through my years in the trade, I'd never met a person like him. There was a strong connection, and so I made it a point to introduce myself and to get to know the guy," said Tosco. "Ant' has since become a personal friend — to me and others in my family — and I can attribute much of what I've learned professionally to the guy who, just a few years ago, was a chance encounter. Needless to say, I signed up for more Reikow courses. I've now been to dozens of them."

As he became more knowledgeable, Tosco also became more confident as a person, and professionally. That confidence made it possible for him to strengthen all facets of his life.

"Looking back, I'd be flattered if someone felt like that about me some day," added Tosco. "So, as they

say, everything comes back to you. And soon it'll be my turn to help younger people, to serve as a mentor.

"This also reminds me that they're out there: those amazingly-skilled and knowledgeable, helpful, naturally good people who are eager to help others. I wish many more of us would have an Anthony Reikow in their life; it would improve things for all of us in the trades," Tosco said. "My advice for others is to open yourselves to a mentor. Seek one out, and allow it to develop you professionally. A lot of good can come from it."

So, I asked the mentor

Tosco had me sufficiently curious, so I picked up the phone and called B.J. Terroni to speak with Anthony Reikow. He was astounded to hear of his young disciple's admiration.

"I'm so honored," said a baffled Reikow. "To me, it's really a calling, a passion to help out. The more

I can lift up and help others, the more fulfilled I become personally and professionally.

"Y'know — it's not that I do this sort of thing intentionally; it just happens as naturally as sitting behind the wheel of a car," he continued. "I also feel it's a gift from God, a calling if you will. Helping others, especially encouraging and educating young people in the trade, is a bit like ministry, I suppose.

"I like to think I'm helping to change and improve lives," he added. "I'm always surprised to hear from students I had

many years ago who recall things I told them, maybe not the exact content, but the encouragement. That's humbling!"

Where to begin?

Trade pros, here is what Reikow recommends. Simply be willing. "That's a great place to start," he said. "Join and get involved with trade associations like OESP, PHCC and the RPA and IAPMO. Look for local, regional and national involvement. Associations desperately need and look for help; simply put your desire to work."

Young people just getting started, or looking to move into a new field, can begin by talking with a trade pro who they know to be involved in the industry beyond the scope of their own work or business.

Reikow adds that young people in the trades should continually strive to be educated. Seek out a good trade school. He adds, "Research and contact all of the trade associations. Among them, PHCC has enormous resources, and routinely strives to connect young people with well-connected trade pros."

Finally, says Reikow, "Have some humility, and energize your willingness to become involved, and to serve. We work in an honest, solid trade within a 'community' of really fine people. The plumbing, heating and HVAC trades are growing, and growing in their sophistication, too. And, as long as there are people, we'll need people who know how to install and keep these systems running."

"I've enjoyed 41 great years in this industry," he said. "Very early in my career, I had an excellent mentor in my now-lifelong friend, Walter Tittermary [who started his career in the industry 50 years ago and who now works part time at BJ Terroni Co.]. Walter taught me well, and shared from his heart so many good things that influenced me positively."

"Today, I'm living proof that we can be happy in our work, find satisfaction in helping others too — and can take home an honest paycheck each week with which to raise a family," concluded Reikow. "What more can we ask for?"

This concludes a four-part series on trade recruitment. You can find parts 1, 2, and 3 in the September, October and November issues of *PHC News*, respectively. ●

John Vastyan owns Common Ground, a trade communications firm based in Manheim, Pennsylvania.



Anthony Reikow (left), and Walter Tittermary, (right) — both are education and training specialists for manufacturer's rep firm, B.J. Terroni. Reikow is Anthony Tosco's mentor, and Tittermary is Reikow's long-time mentor.