



By Katherine Burrows

ELEVATE PLUS PROGRAM BOOSTS BAY OF QUINTE REGION COMMUNITY

At first glance, the Elevate Plus program is just another effective job skills training program that prepares candidates for stable, long-term employment in the local manufacturing sector. There is so much behind the program and its providers to empower job seekers, support employers, and improve community for the entire Bay of Quinte region.

To learn more about lives being changed by Elevate Plus, I sat down with Neil Dick, Elevate Plus Manufacturing Program Coordinator, at Loyalist Training and Knowledge Centre, and Mike Hewitt, Manufacturing Resource Centre Coordinator, at Quinte Economic Development Commission. Despite meeting on Zoom, the passion both gentlemen share for this program came through with unquestionable clarity.

Opening the conversation with friendly banter about which one of them I should listen to and which one I should disconnect, their friendly, open smiles and amiable manner, communicated to me how they are able to quickly and effectively build a solid, genuine rapport with their students.

Relationships that participants develop with staff and fellow students become a major source of support, and in some cases even a lifeline, while they strive to prepare themselves for a new career. In many cases, the participants are often part of marginalized groups, or face one or more barriers to employment, such as a lack of

housing, finances, transportation, or dental coverage. Some have little more than a grade eight education. Some have criminal records, or mental health issues.

"I have to say that this course has helped me value myself again. Before Elevate Plus I was very down on myself. I felt like I was garbage and useless. A very big thanks to Neil Dick for inspiring me to value myself and to know it in my heart now. Thank You Elevate Plus Team!"

Mike clarifies, "Program staff are not trying to be experts in everything. We leverage and rely on many other experts and organizations throughout the community. Wraparound supports are key." Routinely they collaborate with over fifty community partners, such as Quinte Access for transport, the Sexual Assault Centre, Ontario Works, local food banks, and housing supports.

As barriers are addressed and supports are put in place, the program is able to teach participants specific manufacturing skills geared jobs in the region with both manufacturers and food processors.

Integrated into technical skills development are the less tangible soft skills such as accountability, resilience and teamwork. Mike notes that Neil spent more than twenty-five years working as a leader in industry before he became an instructor. "He treats his classroom like a business. Students are expected to arrive on time, respect the

duration of breaks, and maintain their 'workplace' by cleaning up after themselves." "The Elevate Plus program helped me in so many ways. I was in a situation where employment was a problem for me due to a criminal record. Elevate Plus looked beyond my barriers and helped me sharpen my skills and taught me a lot of new things. I would definitely recommend Elevate to anyone who has employment problems. I thank them for their service and I feel Elevate should be available to everyone in any situation."

Neil adds, "It's about giving both the participants and the employers the tools to succeed. We teach personality dimensions and look for naturally occurring teachable moments to discuss conflict resolution. Conflict doesn't just happen during that ten-minute period you've set aside to talk about it. Disagreements come up during group work and other classroom interactions." He laughs, "Teaching the technical skills is the easy part."

"Anyone who is struggling in life and does not know where to turn needs this program in their life. The skills and help the great people at Elevate Plus provide, you will not find anywhere."

Participants study life skills they may not have acquired elsewhere and learn to integrate with other people in the workplace. Low self-esteem, depression, and long-term isolation are common experiences. "Almost

every person enters with their chin down, their eyes down," Neil shares, "But they leave looking up."

Participants move through steps in bite-sized pieces. "When they go into the job trial stage of the program, they've already visited the workplace, met their boss, and been introduced to coworkers. Also, the few hundred Elevate Plus grads form part of a growing support circle for new participants," explains Neil. "We make sure to introduce newcomers to former grads working at that business. They really take the new participants under their wing and show them the ropes."

"This program is incredible because the team of trainers, Neil, Lori, Pam, Dan and other visitors for lessons and seminars are all sincere, honest, and legit. They give their all and it's very impactful. I would like to extend an offer that, if ever possible, to do anything to assist future students. It would be my honour."

Mike notes with satisfaction that seventy-five percent of the grads remain in employment after one year. Mental health still presents challenges in some cases, but this is a much higher retention rate than hiring off the street. "Employers are invariably happy," says Mike. "We continue to partner with employers from the original cohort who have hired participants each time we've run the program."

"Another part of the program that helps employers is training incumbents who are ladder-ing." Mike explains, "Ladder-ing means we help people move up in the company providing supervisor prep courses. Employers tend to promote the best person for the job, but that doesn't mean they have the skills needed for that next level. We teach them how to work with people in a managerial capacity."

"Elevate Plus was an exceptional experience that takes the stress out of obtaining a job if you are determined throughout the course. Information provided was invaluable and will assist me greatly in future endeavours. And as a free program for participants the care shown to them is awesome."

In 2016, the then Elevate program became Elevate Plus with added components to help provide a talent pipeline to the local Bay of Quinte region manufacturing hub. Originally, the funding was provided through Essential Skills Ontario and was bridged by Trenval Community Futures Development Corporation and the Eastern Ontario CFDC Network in equal partnership with Hastings County Community & Human Services.



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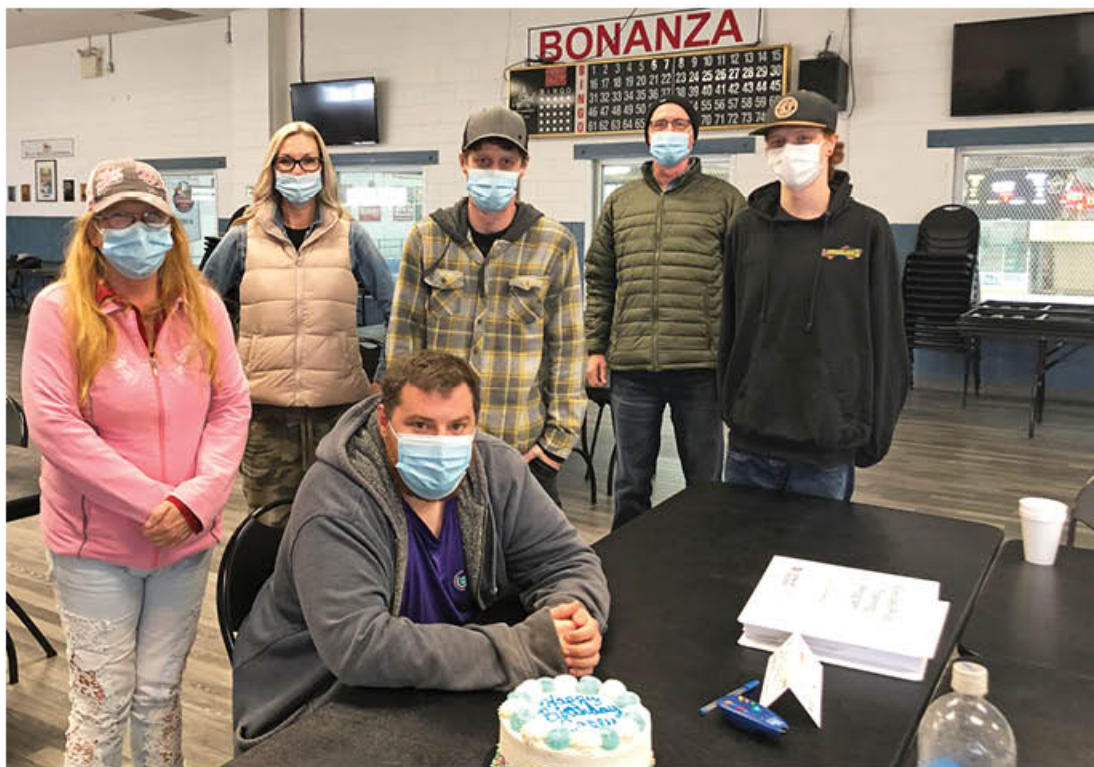
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With the switch in 2016, the Elevate Plus program became a Skills Advance Ontario program. QEDC was selected by the then Ministry of Advanced Education & Skills Development, to run one of three pilot schemes. QEDC contracted Loyalist Training and Knowledge Centre, to adapt the previous curriculum and add in components for improving employer onboarding and support.

Funding from the Ontario and Canadian governments makes the program possible. The staff, participants, employers, and the community make it successful. "Developing employers' coaching and mentoring skills is an important program component," observes Mike. "We make sure company trainers are aware of adult learning styles, people's perceptions about the outcome of the training, and people's concerns they have the skills to do the training. We also provide employers with mental health first aid."

"Hopefully, what society is understanding is that mental health challenges affect every segment of society," adds Neil. "Employers can experience this at all levels of their organization and we're all trying to help address barriers that would increase mental health challenges. We even bring a psychotherapist into class to speak about mental health in general terms."

"As someone who has gone through many courses of this sort, none has provided the

level of care and training that the Elevate Plus team provides. Both the team and environment are inviting and encouraging. I would recommend this course to anyone who is serious about wanting a better life."

Often, participants are shy to ask for help, but they do want to complete the program and graduate successfully. Neil compares the situation to a scene from Indiana Jones, "You know, there's this cart balanced precariously on two wheels, being driven around a sharp corner on the side of a steep cliff at the top of a deep canyon. We want to provide the support to get that cart back on all four wheels. And when that happens, we all get better at doing things for ourselves in our own lives."

Program staff work hard to build a high degree of trust with participants in such a short time. They appreciate the gift of being allowed to speak to the individual needs of each participant to create a combination of wraparound supports that addresses their unique challenges. "Our staff are experienced with understanding different backgrounds and have empathy for those who come from circumstances that are different from our own," says Neil. The team includes Dan Brennan, Lori Smith, Pam Wilson, Colleen Ringham and Tiffeny Dyck.

Mike notes, "It's not just Neil and the team. Often there is a class member in each cohort

who takes people under their wing. And that's in addition to the camaraderie within the group."

"Elevate Plus is an absolute game changer!!! It has made my life a million times better!!! Elevate Plus is an experience that I will hold on to in my heart forever! Elevate Plus has opened doors that I thought were locked. I have made lifelong friends with the team and the classmates!! A huge thank you Neil, Lori, Dan and Pam."

Although there are clear expectations for punctuality and behaviour, Neil likens the bonds created to those experienced at summer camp. "You know you've only been with these people a short time, but it seems much longer, and it gets emotional when the program ends. That's why our grads stay in touch and they are honoured to help mentor the subsequent groups because they want to continue being a part of such a powerful program. People's lives are being changed."

"The program has enriched my life in so many ways. Found a part of me that I've lost over the years. Feeling more confident."

When it comes time for graduation, many VIP guests attend to show their support, including representatives from the local MP and MPP, Municipal Governments, Regional Police Services, and community partners. Jim Harrison, Mayor of Quinte West, has personally attended almost all of the twenty-eight ceremonies to date. Ontario Works staff members attend regularly and that "charges up a lot of batteries," says Mike.

"There are a lot of wins in the community. When participants are able to overcome barriers and retain regular employment, it changes everything." Neil emphasizes, "they do the work, we just help them formalize their goals. The participants are the ones who go out and achieve them."

"I have a much stronger work ethic. I've learned a lot about myself and what I want in life, what it will take me to get there, with a lot of support from staff and everyone else in the program."

And achieve them they do! All of the graduates have been offered jobs at the end of their program. Many have never had a stable job with benefits before. Neil proudly adds, "Several of our grads are recognized as employee of the month or have been promoted at the organization where they've been hired. Often, when I visit a company

and they have twelve months' worth of awards on display, we have multiple grads on the wall over the year. It's very rewarding and we're proud to be able to help."

To say they merely help where they can is a huge understatement. The community commitment that pulls off this level of success and change is incredible. "Employers often take on the role of dad, uncle, coach," shares Mike. "The program is centred around the employer too, creating a genuine partnership. Elevate Plus staff become an extension of the manufacturing employer's staff."

Mike adds, "The participants all have the staff's cell numbers, and the staff have theirs. Calls can be at all hours when a participant is dealing with a crisis and has nowhere else to turn. And they also get invited to celebrate when participants get married, have a baby, or buy a vehicle. Neil has even been asked to be in one grad's wedding party."

"I came into this program with reservations as the previous one was not a good experience. Very early on I was shocked to see how each and every person involved in this program goes above and beyond to help us to succeed and it doesn't stop when class ends. I am so thankful to have been a part of this and I'm looking forward to this new adventure. I could not have done this if everyone involved did not care and want you to succeed. Thank you everyone! I feel like I have a purpose and I matter!"

Honestly, as I listen to Mike and Neil talk, it's hard not to be moved by all the stories of transformation. "You should see our graduations," Mike says. "Even now, when we have to gather virtually, there's still not a dry eye in the house."

"Overall, I believe that this program was very beneficial. I was lost and at the lowest point in my life. I wanted to give up because I felt like I had nowhere to turn. This course was not what I had imagined. It turned out to be more rewarding. Not only were we trained on an emotional/mental level, I was provided with an excellent support system that never gave up on me. I wanted to give up and they wouldn't let me. This course is more than just a training program, it builds your self-esteem and allows a person to regain self-confidence. It allows a person to become a better version of themselves. Thank you for all that you do!! I now have the strength to get my life back on track!!" 🌻

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