

VIC HIGH'S ELECTRICAL PROGRAM DRAWS DIVERSITY

April 2021

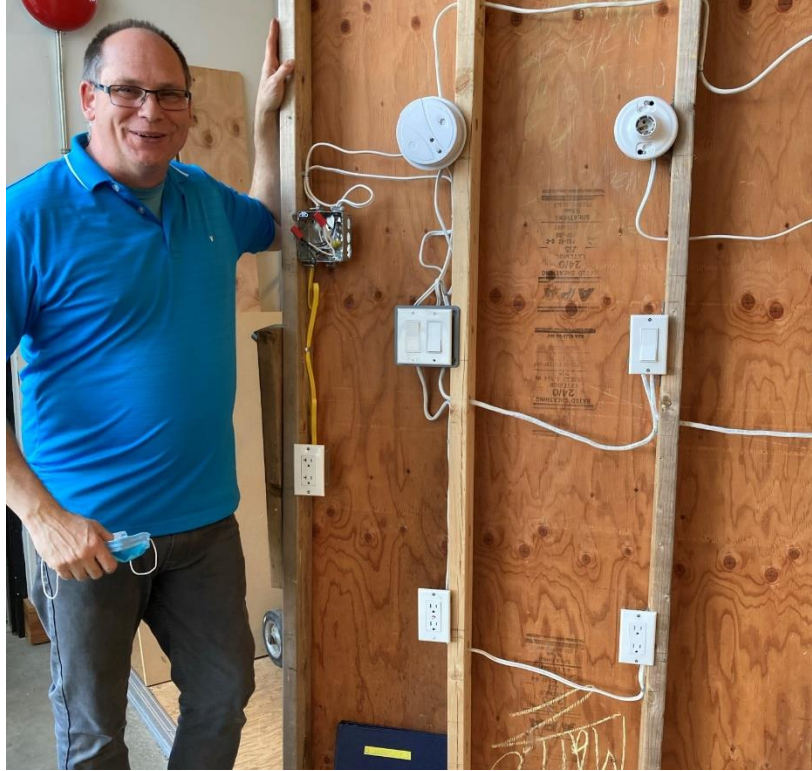
By King Lee, VHS 1958

The only female student in Stew Wheeler's Electrical program at Vic High's Fairey Tech has long aspired to a career in nursing. But with electrical or mechanical engineering as a second career option, her enrolment in Wheeler's program starts to make more sense.



Grade 12 student Gabrielle Marier-Farmilo says, "The welding class I took earlier was really cool." But together with living a five-minute walk from Vic High's Fernwood campus, she also admits, "I just wanted to be back in this building."

Under the covid-mandated semester system, Gabrielle currently takes physics and dancing at Vic High's Topaz campus, and drives from there to the Fernwood/Fairey Tech campus during the lunch break. Major seismic updates continue in the main Vic High Fernwood campus buildings, but the 2011 Fairey Tech addition is open and automotive, carpentry, electrical and other technical courses continue there.



Electrical teacher Stu Wheeler. Each student has their own practice station.

Clearly students enrol in the Electrical program for many reasons, but says Wheeler, “Anyone who wants an electrical job can get one, specially these days.”

A respected teacher at Vic High since 2002, Wheeler first spent time in all three Victoria school districts as a TOC (teacher on call), then taught carpentry, woodworking and drafting at Vic High for a year. The next four years he was at Cedar Hill Junior Secondary where he also taught metalwork and electronics.

The first courses he taught at Vic High were power mechanics, drafting and electronics, later adding woodworking, a trade in which he had earlier earned his Red Seal journeyman status.

“The Vic High shops funnel students to Camosun College,” says Wheeler, ‘under the Trade Exploration program brought forward by the province’s Industry Training Authority in 2016.”

“I do a lot more practical teaching than Camosun,” Wheeler continues, estimating that the practical training takes up 60 per cent of the curriculum while theoretical classroom work takes up the remaining 40 per cent.



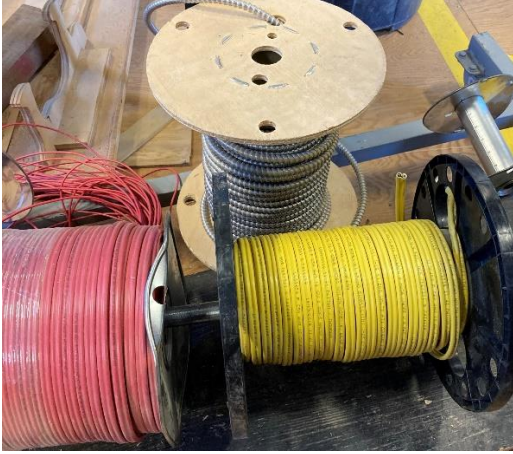
Students re-use electrical wire many times.



Twist-on wire connectors, also called marettes.

Wheeler says the WATT (Workplace Alternative Trades Training) three-week training program supported by the Construction Foundation of B.C. helps student find jobs after graduation.

“There are lots of jobs out there for electrical labourers in the residential and commercial fields,” says Wheeler. “First-year apprentices can earn up to 60 per cent of a unionized journeyman’s wage in the first year and the rate goes up 10 per cent per year the following three years.”



Many different gauges of wire are needed in the program, so students understand the differences.

“The stigma’s not there anymore,” he said of the now dated view that university was the goal and trades were the default. “Everyone’s success is different.”

Mr. Wheeler genuinely enjoys the job and the students and gets great satisfaction from student success stories.

He recalls one student who was almost living on the streets when he enrolled in Vic High’s trades programs, and eventually returned to tell the teacher, “You got me to where I am today.”

One of Wheeler’s students must have been particularly pleased to have been chosen to do an electrical work experience right at Vic High. He was assigned to work with the electricians involved in the school’s renovations and is doing his practical experience steps away from his classroom.

Hunter Jackson is another student in Wheeler’s Electrical program, who says his father’s interest in the trades probably influenced his decision to try out Vic High’s trade programs to see which one interests him. Hunter had high praise for his electrical course teacher, saying “Mr. Wheeler explains everything so well.”



But his clear interest in cars may suggest an automotive-related career is more in the cards for this young entrepreneur. At 15, and not yet possessing a driver's license, Hunter has already owned, fixed and sold three vehicles – a 1978 Mustang, a 1981 Camaro, and a 2007 Mazda. He currently owns a 2001 Mustang convertible and looks forward to driving it when he gets his license.

Like Gabrielle, Hunter is also enrolled in dance at the Topaz campus. "I don't know why I joined," he admits, although he says COVID-19 has affected his social life and he wanted to be around friends and meet new people. He travels between the school's two campuses on an electric bike.

COVID may have turned students' worlds upside down. But it is clear that with success-focussed teachers like Stu Wheeler engaging and empowering students, and such a wide range of course options at Vic High providing balance, current Vic High students are in good hands.

"I love this school," says Hunter. A sentiment we suspect many students share.