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Specialty Business Report – January 26, 2018

This past Friday, January 26th, we kicked off our fourth **Skills for Life** trip of the 2017-2018 school year. This is the third year that the Bridge Youth Center has run this program, and we are excited about the opportunities this year has to offer. The gist of this program is to shine light to students about great career opportunities right here in the community. We have found that many students approaching their senior year of high school are unsure if college is the right choice for them; many are looking for an alternative method to build a career. Students tend to be oblivious to the opportunities our community has to offer. Whether that is manufacturing, construction, or health services to name a few, our goal is to visit these businesses and start networking and building relationships for students who may be interested in a specific field.

Our group had a smaller number of participants this month. As a result, we were only able to visit and tour one business, Walters Gardens. Our day was cut shorter than usual and we had students back in school by late morning.

Once we arrived at **Walters Gardens**, we were greeted by COO, Troy Shumaker, along with HR Director, Becky Oudshoorn, our hosts for the morning. Troy lead us to a meeting room where he provided some background information on the company. We learned that Walters Gardens was founded in 1946 and has grown to be the largest Wholesale Perennial Nursery in the country, providing over 20 million plants to over 5200 customers. Walters is divided into two main sections; a Bare Root Division that works primarily with roots and planting, and a Greenhouse section that works specifically with growing, cutting and grading plants. They employ about 240 people plus about 70 temporary employees during peak season. Following Troy's introduction, he had two of their employees, one from the bare root division, and one from the greenhouse division, share a little bit about their time at Walters and how they progressed in the company. Both had been with Walter's for some time now and expressed the value of development and flexibility that Walters provides their employees. They said that Walters genuinely wants you to succeed in your career and will do whatever they can to help you get there. Additionally, they are open to job movement. If an employee wants to try a different position within the company, Walters will do their best to listen and adjust. They train all employees in-house, and anyone can be successful provided they work hard and are willing to learn. An entry level position at Walter's would entail transporting perennials around the greenhouses, picking orders, and weeding. An entry level position starts off at \$11.50/hour with benefits including vacation, holiday pay, retirement, and health

insurance. A typical employee works 40 hours per week with potential overtime pay of up to 60 hours during peak season. They are always looking for help and they cannot find enough good people that are willing to work hard, be committed, willing to learn, and pay attention to detail. They remarked how it is their policy to promote from within, which is why so many people have started at the bottom and worked their way up. The best employee is one that is flexible, adaptable and is willing to help others. It is expected that employees are punctual, dependable and finish what they start. There is a scaled earning potential with each job that is based on performance. As you prove your ability and dependability, higher positions of responsibility come with it.

Following the employee presentations, Troy and Becky lead us through their bare-root division and one of their greenhouses. We got the chance to see how the roots are separated from each plant, how it is packaged in crates, and how it is then stacked and prepared for shipment. It is a really interesting process that has a lot of moving parts. Although, they are technically in the agriculture industry, they are not shy about technological innovation in their business. Each root cutting station has a computer monitor that tracks the number of roots that have been cut and placed for packaging. Furthermore, every crate filled with roots has a barcode on it. The bar code must be scanned every single time the crate is moved within the building. This allows for a thorough understanding of where each of their products are at a given point. After the bare-root tour, we went across the parking lot to their acclimation-range greenhouse. We got to see plants in their tiniest stage of life. This greenhouse is set at 85-90% humidity so that the flowers maintain steady growth, starting in baby form. Being inside the greenhouse was spectacular, the students really loved the freshness of it. All in all, students remarked about the opportunities to work with their hands inside and out. Multiple students commented on the positive atmosphere within the company. They also spoke about how interesting it would be to experiment with new hybrid flowers and create new breeds. Finally, they really enjoyed their time spent at Walters Gardens and learned a lot about the flower industry.

Special thanks to Walters Gardens for giving us the chance to visit your facility and learn about career opportunities!





Student Comments:

“I really enjoyed the atmosphere of Walters Gardens” -Junior, Venture

“I like the advancement opportunities that Walters gives their employees” -Sophomore, Zeeland East

“I’ve never seen so many baby flowers” – Freshman, Zeeland West

“The greenhouse looks like a fun place to work” – Senior, Zeeland East

“The employees look like they enjoy working there” – Junior, Zeeland East