

## A Welder's Perspective

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For the five-year period from 2012 to 2017, the construction industry is short 21,000 pipefitters and 13,600 welders to keep up with workforce demands in the oil and gas industry, according to **FMI**. Open shop welders in the Gulf Region earn anywhere from \$35 per hour to \$70 per hour.

Associated Builders and Contractors' (ABC) **New Orleans/Bayou Chapter** is working hard to recruit and train apprentices in the area. Recently, one of its welding graduates, 19-year-old Robert Dragg, was hired immediately by **Turner Industries** with a six-figure income. Here' s his story, in his own words.



"The first time I struck an arc, I knew it was something I could see myself doing as a career.

Enrolling in a welding class was the best thing I ever decided to do. In the beginning of my junior year, a welding instructor, Chris Weber from the ABC New Orleans/Bayou Chapter, visited my school. As one of the eight Ponchatoula High School students who signed up for the class, I was excited at the prospect of learning what it really takes to be a welder. Although there were eight of us originally, only three of us continued and eventually finished the program.

Before graduation, Mr. Weber offered us an opportunity to come back for the summer months. Shell was sponsoring a program throughout the summer at the ABC school free of charge. At the end of the summer, Turner Industries, partnering with Shell, would

then pick graduates to work for them.

The program was 14 weeks long, five days a week, and nine hours a day. At night and on weekends, I had to work for gas, my truck note and my insurance, because my family could not afford to help me. It was difficult, and at times I got frustrated, angry and exhausted.

My motivation was the promise that if I completed the program, Turner Industries would offer me a job. On graduation day, I spoke with a man named Dallas Evers. He asked if I could pull on a wrench and when I said yes, he told me to go to the Turner office and I would hire on at Shell Chemical Plant in Geismar, La. I was hired on as a helper and knew I wasn' t quite ready to begin my career as a welder yet, so I went back to the ABC Bayou Chapter for further training.

After graduating at the highest level of welding ABC Bayou Chapter offered, I was able to continue my job at Shell Chemical Plant as a combination welder. September marked one year there. Since graduating school, I bought a brand new home, got engaged to the most beautiful girl I' ve ever known, and went back to the ABC chapter, but this time, as a welding instructor."