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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## High schoolers explore heavy equipment operation

First-of-its-kind program enrolling students for fall semester after 2 years of success

The call came on her 18th birthday.

Marley Sherbon was hired as an operating engineer apprentice with construction giant Mortenson — she would have a chance to pursue her dream of becoming a crane operator.

“I was shocked to the point where I was in tears and my mom was in tears, because she was right next to me when I answered the call,” the recent Caledonia Area High School graduate said.

Sherbon is just one of the success stories to come out of the Operating Engineers Pathway, a statewide career exploration program that’s free to public school students in grades nine through 12. Run by Minnesota Virtual Academy and the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49, the Pathway gives students an up-close look at the field of heavy equipment operation and repair, while offering a chance to earn high school, college and apprenticeship credit simultaneously.

Now enrolling for its third year, the Pathway has seen faster-than-expected growth, with 181 students participating from 76 school districts last school year. Of the 56 high school seniors enrolled last year, 22 planned to pursue a career in equipment operation.

“There’s an incredible appetite for students and their parents to feel like they’re having a meaningful career pathway and opportunity with industry and education,” said Jenny Winkelaar, director of workforce and community development for Local 49.

The program's success comes as companies report a shortage of skilled labor and as jobs in the trades gain attention for being meaningful careers at good wages — without the need for burdensome college debt.

"There's never been a better time to be an equipment operator or a mechanic in this industry than right now," Local 49 Business Manager Jason George said.

Pathway students can take four, one-semester classes online that cover topics from equipment fundamentals to grade and construction math. The online classes offer flexibility, and in-person learning events provide hands-on experience and industry networking opportunities.

“I am absolutely amazed at the opportunity our students have statewide to learn and partner with Local 49,” said Mary Morem, superintendent of Houston Public Schools, which houses Minnesota Virtual Academy. “I feel like it is a triple win. A win for the students to have a chance to run equipment and learn from our industry experts, a win for the college as students are able to articulate credits, and a win for the industry as they are getting young people to join the industry with background knowledge and passion for the pathway.”

The program is the first of its kind in Minnesota.

“The most unique thing about it is that no school in the state was able to really do a deep dive on heavy equipment, because no school could afford to buy heavy equipment,” Pathway instructor Catherine DesChamps said. “And we have found ways to make the classes really interesting. ... We get really good feedback from the kids.”

“I would highly recommend all the classes,” said Zachary Stanger, a recent graduate of Becker High School who will be an apprentice with Rachel Contracting next spring. He said the instructors invest time in students to help them find success and explore the “endless possibilities” in the field.

“Like any high school careers program, it’s all about exploration,” instructor Zachary Humphrey said.

Some students will realize equipment operation isn’t for them, but those who complete the courses and apply to be apprentices will have “a really good foundation,” Humphrey said.

After a few weeks on the job with Mortenson as part of Local 49’s apprenticeship program, Marley Sherbon agrees.

“I think that the Pathway program is spot on getting you ready for the real world,” she said.

The Operating Engineers Pathway is now enrolling for the fall semester. Students and parents can learn more at [local49.org/pathway](http://local49.org/pathway) or by emailing [careerprep@mnva.org](mailto:careerprep@mnva.org).

*The **International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49** has been building the future since 1927. Today it represents more than 14,000 heavy equipment operators, mechanics and stationary engineers across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, making it one of the largest trade unions in the region. Its highly skilled members work in a wide range of industries, from road construction to mining to renewable energy and more.*

***Minnesota Virtual Academy**, a program of Houston Public School District, is a full-time online public school for students in grades K-12. It is dedicated to inspiring and empowering students through an education experience tailored to their needs.*

***Operating Engineers Pathway** introduces high school students to careers in heavy equipment operation through a unique partnership between Minnesota Virtual Academy and IUOE Local 49. Students can earn four semesters of high school credit while receiving the training necessary to enter the Local 49 apprenticeship program.*

**Photo cutlines:**

OE\_Pathway-1: Local 49 equipment operating apprentice Marley Sherbon, who is working for Mortenson, smiles for the camera on a southern Minnesota jobsite. The 2022 Caledonia Area High School graduate applied to be an apprentice after completing the Operating Engineers Pathway.

OE\_Pathway-2: Marley Sherbon, of Caledonia, attempts a hands-on challenge using a backhoe during an in-person event at Ziegler Cat in Shakopee April 30 as part of the Operating Engineers Pathway.

OE\_Pathway-3: Marley Sherbon, of Caledonia, conducts a cylinder cutout test with guidance from Ziegler instructor Jeff Ford at Ziegler Cat in Shakopee April 30 during a hands-on experience through the Operating Engineers Pathway.

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