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What's Under the Hood? Training With Good Job Prospects

By PATRICK McGEEHAN

On a frigid Monday night late last month, long after the daytime students had departed, Jose A. Castro, a vice principal at Automotive High School in Brooklyn, stood before two rows of desks parked next to several cars in a second-floor classroom. Before him sat a diverse and unlikely group of adult recruits that he hopes will help replenish the shrinking ranks of qualified mechanics in New York City.

Sprinkled among the burly men were a few women with well-tended fingernails, all dressed in navy blue coveralls. Some in the class were out of work, some had government jobs. At least one had served time in prison. Several did not even have licenses to drive. But all of them had come to the school with the hope that it was not too late for them

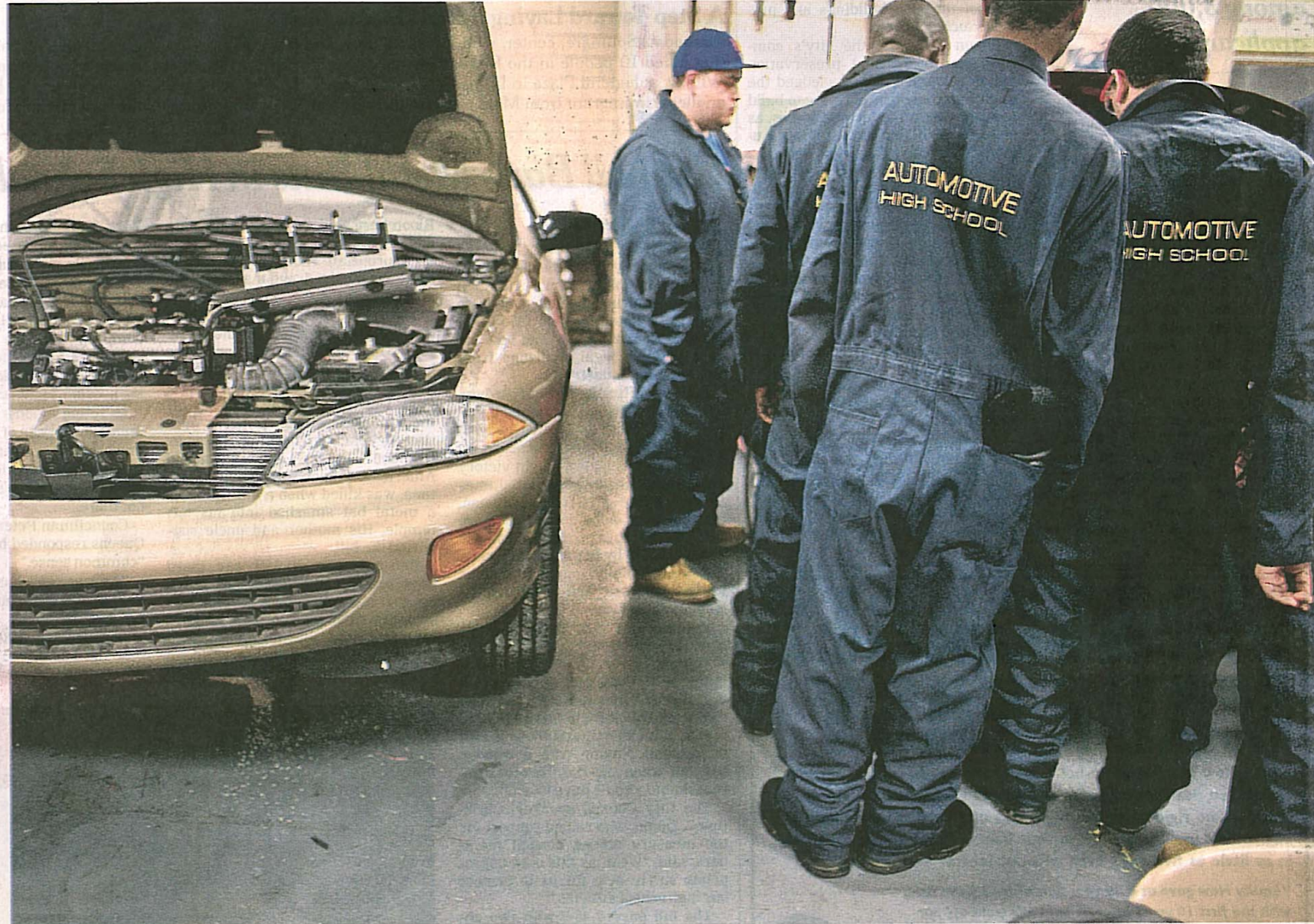


to shift into better-paying jobs in the automotive trade.

The rapid computerization of car engines has forced many veteran mechanics to choose early retirement rather than learn new technologies. That trend has created more openings than employers have been able to fill. In the five years through 2005, the number of people working in car repair in the city declined by about 6 percent to fewer than 10,000, according to the Manhattan office of the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"I just want to show the men what I've got," said DeShonia L. Holman, 24, a soft-spoken student in Mr. Castro's class whose day job is maintaining a tennis club on Roosevelt Island. "I think it's sexy for a woman to know how to fix a car."

Motivations are of little concern to Mr. Castro



Photographs by Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

Students at Automotive High School in Brooklyn, above, learned about engine components in a training program intended to replenish the shrinking ranks of qualified auto mechanics. At left, Jeannette Mendoza, 31, is one of the women taking advantage of the free class. The program was organized by union leaders.

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and the union leaders who organized the free course, which meets two nights a week. They are willing to take anyone who wants to be trained for garage work.

Mr. Castro is only 40, but he sounded like a graybeard harking back to the days when tuning up car engines was desirable work. Now those stable high-paying jobs are going unfilled all around the city because garage work, although cleaner than it once was, is less socially acceptable, he said.

"We believe that some of our kids can make this a great living," he said. But, he added, "some people think it's not pretty enough for their children."

After decades of declining emphasis on vocational education in the city, Automotive High, which turned out just 52 graduates last year, is on track to double that number this year, said Melissa Silberman, the school's principal. She said only about one-fourth of last year's graduates went directly into the auto industry, while most of the rest went on to automotive schools or colleges.

Statistics show that the need for mechanics is not just a local problem. The federal Labor Department estimated that more than 400,000 mechanics jobs would become available nationwide, through retirements and new openings, between 2004 and 2014.

But Norman Brown, legislative director of the New York State Council of Machinists in Brooklyn, said, "I do

think the shortage of mechanics is more acute in the New York City area."

And the shortage exists despite the availability of entry-level positions that pay at least \$17 an hour, according to union officials. With years of training and experience, a skilled mechanic or technician can earn \$100,000 or more annually, they said.

Getting more recruits into the classroom is a considerable challenge because of the stigma attached to the job, said Fred Bordoff, owner of the New York Center for Automotive Technology, an independent repair shop in Sunnyside, Queens.

"It's not something that people aspire to get into," Mr. Bordoff said. "If a kid goes home and says, 'I want to be a mechanic,' his parents will probably have a heart attack. It's always been and still is, 'My son an auto mechanic?' They're too embarrassed to say that."

Another reason for the labor shortage, Mr. Brown said, is that the tradition of apprenticeships has faded, along with the city's manufacturing base.

"With the deindustrialization of America, there is not really a pool of workers like there was," Mr. Brown said. "In '72 or '69, a trained mechanic could walk into any factory and get a job."

An added factor, he said, is that many job applicants cannot clear the minimum hurdles of passing a drug test and maintaining a clean driver's license or a commercial driver's license if they want to work as a truck or bus mechanic. To meet the needs

of unionized repair shops, the Consortium for Worker Education, a union-financed initiative, arranged to pay for the training course at Automotive High as a pilot program.

The consortium, whose partners include unions of machinists, auto workers and Teamsters, is planning additional courses in other places, like Mr. Bordoff's garage. It rounded up recruits from various placement agencies. Some of the women received referrals from Nontraditional

The jobs pay well, but are shunned in some circles.

Employment for Women, which trains women for jobs in construction and repair.

Roger Jackson, who said he had spent almost all of his adult life in a Virginia prison after getting involved in the selling of illegal drugs, heard about the course from a brother who works in the service department of a local Toyota dealership. He said he was eager to learn a trade that would lead to a legitimate job with health benefits, enabling him, at 34, to start contributing to the Social Security system.

"Right now I need some type of marketable skill so I don't feel like I'm a liability, I'm more of an asset,"

Mr. Jackson said.

Whenever Mr. Castro posed a question, Mr. Jackson's thick left arm shot up first. "I'm learning so much, I'm like a sponge in that class," Mr. Jackson said yesterday.

One floor up from where Mr. Castro was giving half the students a primer on measuring brake pads for wear, Manuel Martinez, another instructor, had a dozen men huddled around the raised hood of a red Ford Escort. He quizzed them on how often the oil should be changed, then lifted a fuel filter and explained its purpose in simple terms.

Kenneth Street, a tall, broad-shouldered resident of East New York, stood back and nodded knowingly. By all appearances, Mr. Street, 34, was in his element.

He said tinkering with cars was what he loved to do and he radiated pride as he described the Mustang Cobra he had modified to race at a local track. But, asked how he made his living, he sheepishly admitted that lately he had been helping his mother run two day care centers.

"Everybody's always telling me I should try mechanics," Mr. Street said, especially the certified mechanics he knows.

In New York State, there are no licensing requirements to work as a mechanic, Mr. Bordoff said. But most dealerships require mechanics to complete training and earn certifications before they can perform any of the more technical repairs on an engine, he said.

Mr. Street said his goal was to land a job with the Metropolitan Trans-

portation Authority as a bus mechanic. He said he understood that the starting pay at the transit agency would be about \$24 or \$25 an hour.

"I'd take that any day," Mr. Street said.

Although the pay is relatively attractive, it is still too low for some to support a family on, said Mr. Brown, who is a nonvoting member of the transportation authority's board.

"I've got guys that fix trucks in south Brooklyn that make \$25, \$26 an hour — a good wage," he said. "But they can't live anywhere near where they work."

Mr. Brown said that of the 1,400 union members he represents, only one or two women were "on the tools." But that may be changing. He said he was encouraged to see young women like Ms. Holman showing an interest in garage work.

Solidly built with a shy smile, Ms. Holman said she was not intimidated by jobs traditionally considered man's work. Lately, she said, she had also been considering trying her hand as an electrician.

"There's a lot of jobs that pay better," she said, but added, "This is something I like doing."

Then she circled past the four-wheel guinea pigs in the automotive laboratory and returned to her desk to catch up with Mr. Castro, who had moved on from measuring with micrometers to checking an electrical circuit. It was after 8 p.m., but Mr. Castro knew that his charges still had a lot to learn.



Krisanne Johnson for The New York Times

Jose Castro, right, teaching students at Automotive High School in Brooklyn. From left, the students are Walter Lainez, Mavis Edwards Sealey, Shawn Roberts and Nelson Naula.