JIM MONTAGUE
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
jmontague@putman.net

Pure Partnership, Lasting Legacy

I enjoyed researching and wiring this month's "Spring Chickens" cover article (page 34) on how science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs are beginning to produce the rookie process engineers, technicians and operators needed to replace their rapidly retiring counterparts. It was refreshing to learn about the headway these programs are making because I've sat through a few dozen presentations in recent years proclaiming the coming brain drain, but offering few suggestions on how solve it. I was beginning to get depressed because they made the problem sound unsolvable. As usual, panicky, doom-and-gloom talk is initially exciting, but it's ultimately cheap, empty and unhelpful.

Anyway, it was a true breath of fresh air to cover STEM efforts at some U.S. community colleges, and even more gratifying to see the help they're getting from some veteran engineers and technicians, who then have a better chance to hire the graduates they need. These students, teachers and builders don't just know the brain drain can be solved—they're living embodiments of how it's done.

One of the best of these was Edward Meyers, who worked for 45 years at Citgo's refinery in Joliet, Illinois, and went on to teach four classes at Joliet Junior College (JJC), where he trained some of the next generation of engineers and operators his profession needs so desperately. To help JJC's process control program take off, he also arranged to bring in added equipment, and even recruited some colleagues from the ISA Will-DuPage Section to teach.

Sadly, Meyers died suddenly on June 13—a devastating blow to family and friends alike, and a true tragedy in every sense. I only met Meyers briefly during JJC's open-house event earlier this year, and was hoping to interview him later at length, but I waited too long and foolishly missed my chance.

It's only small consolation, of course, but Meyers provided a shining example of the cooperation between industry and academia that must be the ultimate solution to the brain drain threatening all areas of process control and automation, and the hundreds of industries they serve. Just as he did, process control veterans be must be willing to jump in, interact directly with their potential replacements, and participate in passing on their hard-won experience and know-how.

Sure, most community colleges and some high schools are willing to develop curriculums that can serve the needs of businesses in their communities, and this can have some success. However, regular teachers and textbooks can't show students more than basic concepts of what they'll need to know to maintain and optimize a distillation column, or carry out partial-stoke valve testing and gather crucial signals and performance values. All the essential, real-world techniques and tweaks must come from the people who've actually done it. There's no substitute. Oil and gas, chemical, pulp and paper, food and beverage, and all other process control users and their organizations must re-commit themselves to offering training to local students in their communities. They can't simply wait until they get new hires in house. No one has time for the old recruit-and-hire go-round anymore.

Meyers imparted his knowledge to hundreds of coworkers and students over the years, and they, his family and his productive career are his best legacy. The present and future tragedy is that no more students will benefit from his expertise and humor. Fortunately, this is something that everyone can help with—particularly those with similar process knowledge. Logically, the best way to remember and honor Meyers is to carry out some of the same helpful activities, get useful process knowledge into more young brains and inspire them to live as productively as he did. No one can really hope to have more of an impact and be more alive than that, right? ■

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