

AHS program, students dubbed 'Olympic' at national conference

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Students in Azle High School's Industrial Refrigeration program at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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A groundbreaking program at Azle High School garnered "Olympic" attention at the 2018 Natural Refrigeration Conference and Expo presented by the International Institute of Ammonia Refrigeration (IIAR) March 18-21. Eleven students in the inaugural AHS Industrial Refrigeration class attended the conference at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs.

Accompanied by Todd Smith, Azle ISD assistant superintendent, Randy Cobb, AHS principal, Don May, AHS physics teacher, and Marcos Braz, owner of MRBraz and Associates of Azle, the students were “the talk of the conference.” Two Azle students made a “very impressive” presentation to the Ammonia Refrigeration Foundation board of directors at the conference, Smith said. “Our program was definitely the ‘buzz’ of the three-day conference,” Smith said. “By the end of the conference each of our students had been offered some sort of job or career opportunity in the refrigeration industry.”

The vision

Among several goals established as part of the Azle ISD’s strategic plan, Destination 2022, is the district’s desire for every student to have a plan for the future after graduation.

That plan may include 15 hours of college or dual credit or advanced placement; enrollment in a post-secondary institution or the military; and/or at least one industry certification.

A separate goal in the plan is to partner with families and the community for student success.

When Braz approached the district to express his vision to train high school students in the trade of Industrial Refrigeration, school officials realized such a program would exemplify the district’s strategic plan.

According to Braz, the industrial refrigeration industry faces challenges on two polarized fronts – increasing demand for services and a shortage in the qualified workforce.

“The growing food industry and the industrial refrigeration industry are always in need of fully-trained, hit-the-ground-running, refrigeration technicians and engineers,” Braz said.

He should know.

With more than 30 years of experience in all fields of refrigeration, Braz’ company has its headquarters, a manufacturing site, and an assembling and testing facility in three separate locations in Azle.

A satellite location in Bentonville, Arkansas provides easy access for customers near the retail capital of the U.S.

To facilitate the program, Azle ISD approved the construction of a small refrigeration tech building.

Then, generous donations of time and resources from end users, engineers, manufacturers and contractors completed the lab.

Most importantly, a curriculum was approved, setting the stage for a trial program for the 2017-2018 school year.

Twelve students in grades 10 through 12 enrolled.

In February, six of those students passed the test to become Certified Assistant Refrigeration Operators (CARO) through the Refrigeration Engineers & Technicians Association (RETA), the most recognized organization in the country dedicated to the professional development of industrial refrigeration operators and technicians.

Braz is deeply invested in the program.

Not only does he volunteer time daily to teach the class along with May, but he has also donated equipment worth thousands of dollars, and even funded testing fees and conference registration fees to help ensure students' success.

The conference

AHS students kept a busy schedule at the conference.

They attended a four-hour continuing education program called Mechanical Integrity for Ammonia Refrigeration Systems, and also walked the exhibit hall, where they met and visited with more than 130 vendors and industry leaders. Along with Cobb and May, they attended a "first timers" reception in the main ballroom of The Broadmoor.

AHS students Chris Utech and Kaylen Holmesly did an outstanding job describing the program and their experiences to the board of directors of the Ammonia Refrigeration Foundation, attendees said.

The Azle group even attended an event at the Olympic Training Center that included dinner, a ceremonial lighting of the Olympic Torch, and opportunities to view demonstrations and interact with the Olympic athletes.

While these students gained knowledge, made contact with industry leaders, and came home with real opportunities to begin their careers in the industrial refrigeration industry, the IAR conference's business meeting may be what

they remember most fondly.

Keynote speaker Vince Poscente, a former Olympic speed skier and CEO of the Goals for Acceleration Institute, introduced the Azle students to the crowd of 2,000-plus.

The stirring, unmistakable strains of Olympic Theme and Fanfare – played often during NBC’s TV coverage of every Olympic Games since 1984 – rang out as 11 Azle students took the stage to a standing ovation.

“This program is in the top category of educational opportunities and experiences we have provided Azle ISD students in the 24 years I have been part of the district,” Smith said.