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PHOTO BY PEATY ROMANO



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# Building a Pipeline of Talent

**Peaslee Tech is expanding access to hands-on career and technical training in Douglas County, transforming lives while meeting the critical workforce needs of the community.**

**After more than a decade of steady growth, Peaslee Tech is entering an exciting new era, one focused squarely on building a strong, local workforce and closing the skilled labor gap in Douglas County.**

There is little doubt that Dwayne Peaslee—native Lawrencean, 60-year pipefitter and the visionary for whom The Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center (Peaslee Tech) is named—would take great pride in the impact the organization has made in just its first 10 years. Those who knew Peaslee often recall his unwavering commitment to creating a long-overdue technical training center that could meet the workforce needs of Lawrence and Douglas County. His vision is now a reality, transforming lives and strengthening the local economy in the process.

One of those lives is Andrea Johnson, a Peaslee Tech pharmacy technician graduate who credits the program with helping her secure a stable career and provide for her family as a single mother. Recently, Johnson was able to take her three children on their first-ever Disney vacation. “Without going to Peaslee, I would not have been able to take them,” she says. Her story is just one example of how workforce training creates real opportunity for local families—and keeps talent rooted in Douglas County.

by Megan Hill, photos by Steven Hertzog

*Peaslee Tech's Charlie Lauts and Jay Hundley building affordable housing in Lawrence*



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*A certified welding class at Peaslee Tech*

To fully appreciate how far Peaslee Tech has come, it helps to understand its humble beginnings. During campus tours, Peaslee Tech CEO Kevin Kelley often shares stories from the early days when the school offered just a handful of programs focused primarily on construction and transportation. One favorite example is the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program, which launched with just one student, one instructor and one truck. Today, that same program operates a fleet of four trucks and graduates more than 140 students each year—many of whom go on to fill critical transportation and logistics roles locally.

This kind of growth reflects a broader challenge facing Douglas County employers: the persistent and widening skilled labor gap.

"We've learned that it's far more effective and efficient to grow our own talent than to try to recruit it from elsewhere," explains Rob Chestnut, CFO of LMH Health, in Lawrence. "That's why LMH Health partners with Peaslee Tech. Peaslee can quickly build customized curriculum to meet our workforce needs and provide skilled workers—from phlebotomists to HVAC technicians."

That need for homegrown talent is echoed across Peaslee Tech's extensive network of employer partners, which now spans 35 careers in industries including health care, manufacturing, automotive, aviation, government and more. These partnerships ensure that training aligns directly with real jobs right here in Douglas County.

"At Peaslee Tech, we see this need every day—and we're ready to meet it," Kelley explains. "By providing accessible, hands-on technical education for both high school students and adult learners, we're building a strong, local pipeline of skilled talent prepared to step directly into high-demand careers. And importantly, we're doing it without requiring students to take on the burden of debt."

To ensure that cost is never a barrier to opportunity, Peaslee Tech recently launched the Peaslee Promise campaign, a fundraising effort to build a \$10-million endowment. The endowment will provide full and partial tuition

scholarships to high school juniors and seniors, as well as Douglas County residents from low-income households, while also strengthening Peaslee Tech's long-term financial stability. The goal is simple but powerful: to keep local talent local and ensure every resident has access to career-building education.

"Peaslee Tech is an important part of the economic and community health of Lawrence and Douglas County," says Douglas County Commissioner, Patrick Kelly. "There is a critical need for skilled workers driven by regional economic development, high-tech manufacturing growth and shortages in specialized industries." While the presence of The University of Kansas and Haskell Indian Nations University contributes to a highly educated population, Kelly notes a growing and distinct demand for technical and trade skills—particularly in manufacturing, health care and specialized fields.

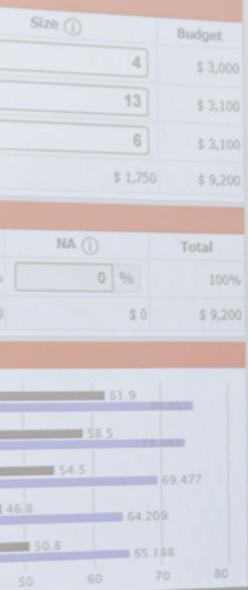
Sarah Plinsky, county administrator, underscores that this challenge extends far beyond county lines. "We're facing a significant labor gap in the skilled trades nationwide," she says. "Experienced workers are retiring faster than we can train new talent, and demand for electricians, welders, carpenters, HVAC technicians and manufacturing specialists continues to rise."

Local employers feel that pressure every day. Mike Bernholtz, plant manager at Amarr, the third-largest garage door manufacturer in the United States, knows firsthand how essential a skilled workforce is. "At Amarr, we need skilled workers across a wide range of trades, from welders and industrial maintenance technicians to robotics and automation specialists," he says. "These are great careers with great companies right here in our community."

Now more than ever, the skilled trades represent a powerful opportunity—especially for young people and adult learners seeking stable, well-paying careers. These fields offer job security, advancement, entrepreneurship and leadership pathways, all while supporting industries essential to the health of our local and national economy.

Peaslee Tech stands ready to meet this moment by strengthening Douglas County's workforce one student, one credential and one career at a time.





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