

# helping industry develop a world-class workforce

by BRENT CHILDERS, Editor



Today's textile manufacturing facilities depend on computerized technology as David York, plant manager at Pharr Yarn's Complex 46 plant, and Mario Sanchez, supervisor, demonstrate. Textile center training assists technicians in transitioning with the technological advances.

Across the state of North Carolina textile companies are tooling up for the battle of their existence. With innovation their weapon of choice, and new technology and skilled labor their armorment, they're marching forward to a



Gwen Perkins

cadence of confidence and determination.

Wait a minute?

Is this the same beleaguered industry we hear about in newspaper editorials which say the industry won't be here in five years? Are we to expect the industry has found some formidable ally to bolster it against the ominous onslaught of cheap imports?

Yes, but it's not a newfound ally. It's been

here all along – just outside Charlotte in the Belmont community of Gaston County.

It's been said that the N.C. Center for Applied Textile Technology is one of the best kept secrets in North Carolina. That may be true for many outside the industry but certainly not accurate for those within the industry who have worked with facility in the various training programs or product

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"I have worked closely with the Textile Center for more than twenty-five years. During that time, I have personally taken classes there and have sent more than two hundred of our associates for various types of training. Like the textile industry, the Textile Center is radically changing its emphasis to a more specialized training and to an industry support role. We no longer need the number of workers we did in the past, but the training required is more specialized and more individualized than ever."

"I understand and appreciate the fact that supporters of the textile industry are genuinely concerned about the people of North Carolina who depend on textiles and other manufacturing across the state. Support for the textile center will continue to be important in helping us to identify and implement the new processes, products and technologies that are necessary for us to compete in the global economy. The center, as that industry resource, is critical to the future of textile manufacturers in our state."

**Stephen G. Dobbins, President & CEO  
Carolina Mills**



"We also commend the Center for making world-class facilities available to Wellman and to many other industry partners. This cooperative effort has the potential of making state of the art testing and processing equipment available to all members of the textile industry. Your foresight in providing the leadership that is responsible for this partnership is commendable. You have assured the Center a leadership role in the effort to maintain a strong textile industry in the Carolinas."

**Ed Wilburn, R&D Lab Manager  
Wellman, Inc.**

development and testing.

An informal survey of yarn and fiber manufacturers, dyestuff suppliers and other industry related firms across North Carolina shows widespread support for the N.C. Center for Applied Textile Technology or what is most commonly referred to within the industry as the textile technology center.

And it isn't only industry executives that say they are recipients of support provided by the center's programs. Many of the people those companies employ also extended a warm thank-you to the textile center for what they described as a lifeline in terms of training them for the industry's future workforce.

Training the textile industry's workforce has been the center's forte. While the center currently is transitioning itself to play a larger role in product development and testing, training programs will continue to be a primary center objective, says Gwen Perkins, who has been with the operation for 12 years and now serves as director.

"I'm still hearing training, training, training," Perkins says of the feedback she receives from within the industry. "That's

what they say they need."

It's obvious from looking at data compiled by the center that the facility has been a powerful ally with industry executives who seek to fine tune their workforce – either at



*Alisa Criswell recently completed an html course which she applies to her job as marketing administrator for Muratec.*

the skilled level or management level.

During 2002-03 the center taught 400 courses and the participants represented 28 counties in North Carolina.

Since 1997, the center reports that more than 15,000 individuals have received

instruction from the facility with the vast majority of those people on the payroll of the 25 to 30 textile employers that used the facility for workforce training programs.

Perkins knows that highly skilled labor is going to be a key to companies competing in today's marketplace.

"To stay in the ball game, you just about have to have mostly computer-controlled machinery because its less labor intensive," she says. "You also have to be able to get the maximum capability out of those machines."

As the industry has moved toward dependence on computerized machines, personnel who once only had to know the mechanical side of fixing a machine now must know electronics, computers as well math formulas and other machine-specific knowledge.

The textile center's training program has helped those technicians understand the transition of mechanical level to the technological level.

Bill Poplin served with the center for 20 years before retiring. He recently returned

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**R.L. Stowe Mills Inc.**

"We have used and continue to use NCCATT as a primary training resource. It has proved to be invaluable for associate development for our company."

**Barry Pomeroy, CFO**  
R.L. Stowe Mills, Inc.



"Your instructors have been excellent. The courses have proven to be a convenient and cost-effective means of delivery. Our Director of Manufacturing for High Performance Yarns reports that this program has provided the critical skills necessary for his technicians to maintain and repair sophisticated electronic controlled production equipment. Graduates of the technical skills training program have dramatically reduced our downtime in this operation, resulting in improved competitiveness and profitability for Pharr."

"The Textile Center is a valuable asset to both Pharr and the textile industry."

**J.M. (Bip) Carstarphen**  
CEO  
Pharr Yarns

to serve as assistant director.

Poplin says he has observed first-hand how the center has assisted textile companies better prepare their workforce. With the transitioning that currently is taking place, Poplin says he knows from his experience that the center can and will be the leading resource for assisting the industry develop a world-class workforce.

There are three primary aspects of the training programs that manufacturers find advantageous when putting the center's staff to work in helping them train their workforces:

- Customized training is a specialty of the center. The Textile Center offers direct assistance to industry in designing "in-house" training programs.

"We customize the training to the needs and processes of individual companies and individual operations," says Perkins. "We can come to you. In the past, many of them have had to come here. We can take it to them."

Helping companies develop their own in-house training has been a strength of the center's industry assistance. "We can train the trainer," says Perkins. "We're very good at that."

The employees participating in the training find the small classes affords ample opportunity for individual attention. Human resource executives say that can be especially important for employees who have been removed from the classroom setting for long periods.

- Employee assessments are designed to help industry identify candidates with special skills, abilities or needs. How much general education a person may need depends on their needs assessment, which are

designed to reflect the needs as related to the employees specific jobs."

"You can't run some of the machines if you don't know how to work a math equation," says Perkins.

- Facility utilization needs are met by offering rooms, labs and the auditorium to



*A course on sliver quality is another example of the center's training utilized by Muratec.*

the industry and community.

In addition to those primary aspects of the training, the center currently is developing a program that will offer web-based training. That service is expected to be up and running by end of the summer. Perkins says the center's programs also will be

offering more general textile training.

Perhaps one of the center's strongest suits is the years of textile industry experience among its staff. The combined experience totals more than 150 years and it's an asset cited by both manufacturing executives and employees who have participated in the programs.

Industry employees interviewed by Legwear Trends cited the training staff's knowledge of their industry as important in helping relate the learning tasks at hand to the real-world workplace environment.

"All our people have extensive industry experience," says Perkins. "That gives us a real edge. We've been in the real world of business and industry for most our lives."

During her tenure, Perkins has seen how the center has assisted North Carolina textile employers. She has seen how the industry's training needs have changed as manufacturers have entered the era of globalization. She says she is somewhat bothered at times when people outside the industry appear to have given up on the textile industry.

"Some people think it's dead," she said. "It (textile industry) is still one of the largest employment segments of North Carolina."

Perkins also has seen how companies have risen to meet the challenges presented by today's global playing field. She and the center's staff are appreciative of the fact that their work is assisting those companies meet those challenges.

She says the Textile Center is prepared to continue that mission.

"We exist solely to support the textile industry," she said.



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