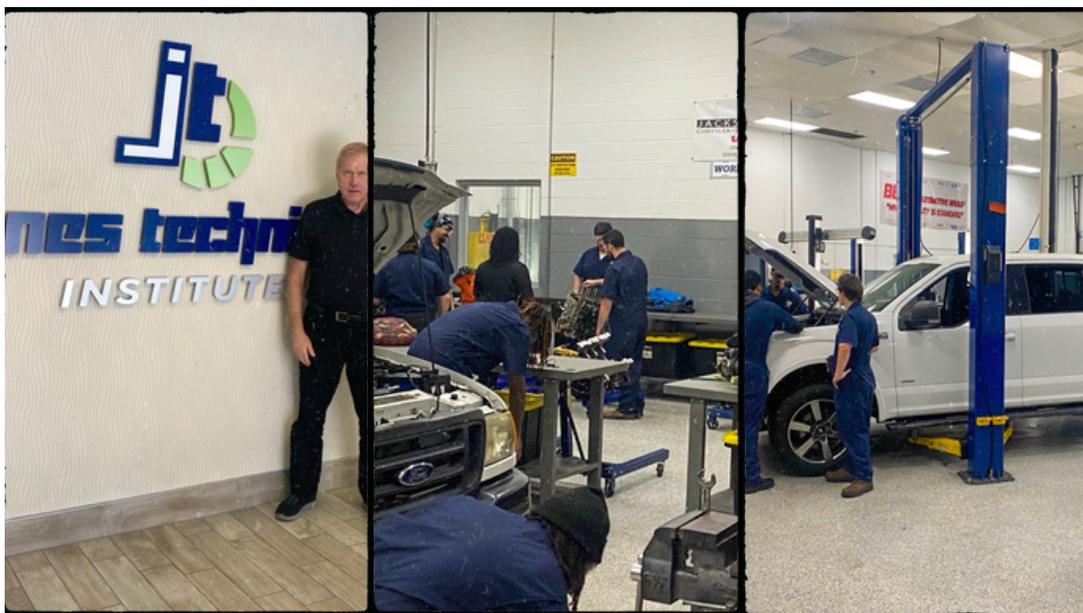


Excited, Amazed, and Frustrated

A Visit That Showed Me What's Possible

By Aaron Clements



I'm writing this article with mixed emotions—excited, hopeful, and frustrated all at the same time.

Those feelings came into sharp focus during a recent trip to Jacksonville, Florida. I traveled there on a Friday to attend an event later that afternoon to promote my book. The day before I left, my friend Darin Damron of American Transmission called to say that, since I would already be in town, he had arranged a tour of J-Tech Institute, a technical institute in Jacksonville.

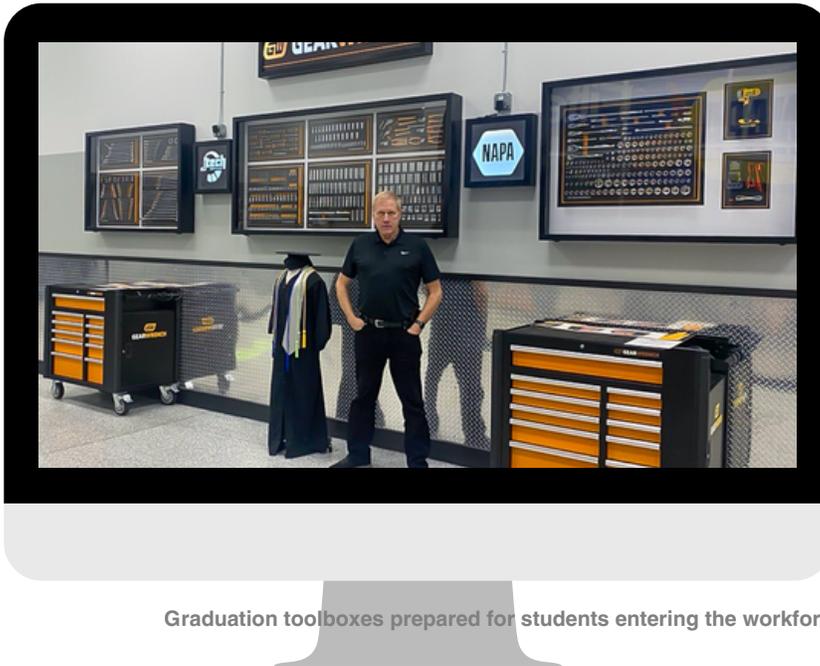
He also invited Deidre Parker, who owns several automotive shops in the Atlanta area, along with Brian Hemingway, a key leader at American Transmission, to join us.

A Facility Built for Focus and Pride

From spotless hallways to professional-grade tools and brand-new student toolboxes, every detail reflected intention and pride.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Career-ready graduates
- Real-world training
- Professional environments
- Lifelong opportunity



Graduation toolboxes prepared for students entering the workforce.

That immediately excited me. I had attended events at the school before and was amazed at how nice it was. I had also been given a brief tour before, but since I was there to teach a class, I didn't get to see everything. This time, I had plenty of time to look, enjoy, and truly absorb the vastness of what they have to offer.

That place is amazing.

We entered the building and were quickly greeted by our tour guide, Caitlin Knowles Healy. She first showed us the administrative offices and a large room where students can work on assignments if they are unable to concentrate at home. From there, we walked down a long hallway with spotless, shiny floors and large work-related photos lining the walls.

Toward the end of the first hallway, just as we turned to the right, we saw tools displayed in glass cases above several brand-new toolboxes. Between the tools were large NAPA Auto Parts posters featuring tools and race cars. To the right of those displays sat 30 or more large crates, each topped with a cardboard box about the size of a toolbox.

Our guide explained that when automotive repair students graduate, they receive a toolbox full of NAPA tools. The crates contained those toolboxes, each filled with brand-new tools, ready to be given to graduating students. They also receive a special NAPA card that offers lifetime discounts on NAPA parts and tools. Wow! It gave me a whole new level of respect for NAPA Auto Parts.

A Proven Model We Should Be Replicating

J-Tech represents a proven model—one that should be replicated across the country. We don't need a handful of schools like this. We need hundreds.



As we continued down the hall, we passed room after room, each designed for a different learning environment, from automotive electrical systems to hybrid vehicles. Many of the rooms were filled with students listening intently to their instructors. I was also impressed to see that every student and instructor wore a J-Tech uniform, and every room was clean, organized, and professional.

Next, we entered the HVAC room. To my right, a small house nestled within the room served as a residential HVAC training facility. On the opposite side were metal stands holding commercial HVAC units. Along one wall were 10 or more air handlers, and beside them were 10 or more compressor units.

It was impressive.

The next room truly floored me. It contained five or six semi-trucks in the bays, along with semi-truck engines, cylinder heads, and transmissions. As I was leaving the room, I spoke with a student and asked what he was working on. He told me he was learning how to read wiring diagrams. He said it was tough, but he was finally starting to understand it. You could see the pride in his eyes when he said that. After that, we walked into a room filled with boats and campers. Students in that area learn electrical, plumbing, and structural repairs. In the next room, there were 10 or more very large outboard boat motors.

We then entered the welding room, which had 20 or more welding booths. Each booth was equipped with a Lincoln Electric welder and a green, yellow, or red indicator light. When a student steps into the booth, the light turns green to indicate it's occupied. When welding begins, the light turns yellow. If the student needs help, they can push a button, and the light turns red, signaling the instructor to come over.

Then we walked into the room I had been waiting for, but it turned out to be multiple rooms instead of just one. There were at least three rooms, all focused on automotive repair. There were rooms dedicated to engines, transmissions, hybrids, and diagnostics. Each had spotless floors, clean lifts, and modern equipment. Most were filled with students in uniform, their eyes fixed on their instructors. It was a beautiful sight.

We also had the chance to speak with an instructor from the commercial truck driving program and briefly peek into the IT training area, but by then it was time to go.

As we took group photos before leaving, I remember feeling a flood of emotions. I was excited because this was something I had always dreamed of seeing. It was exactly what I believe a technical institute should be. I was confident that at least 99% of the graduates from this institute would have careers for the rest of their lives. They could earn a good living doing something they enjoy. They could get married, buy a home, raise a family, and maybe even teach others one day.

But I was also frustrated.

I have seen far too many technical schools that are so underfunded they struggle just to pay for uniforms. I see funding being pushed toward professions that many students don't want to pursue long-term, while skilled trades are overlooked. I've seen instructors trying to do incredible things with very limited resources, worn down to the point where hope starts to fade.

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J-Tech is a Compass Rose Foundation Integrated Education System, a non-profit corporation with over 80 years of proof that this model works. I believe it should serve as the gold standard for how we give our youth a path toward meaningful, fulfilling careers and for how we provide working professionals with opportunities to continue learning in ever-changing fields.

We need hundreds of such facilities across our country.

I urge you to get involved with SASA, and other associations to help amplify our voices.



Hands-on training stations prepared for student instruction



Residential HVAC systems used for real-world diagnostics training



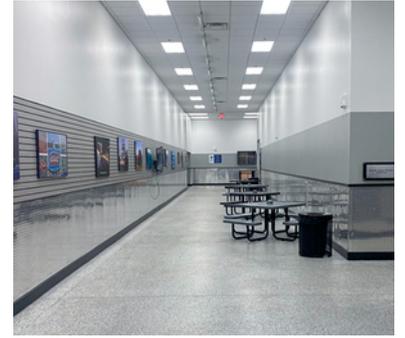
Commercial HVAC lab with fully installed training units



Heavy equipment and powertrain components used in technical training



Automotive classroom and lab space designed for focused instruction



Clean, professional hallways reinforcing pride and discipline



Modern automotive bays equipped for full vehicle diagnostics



Students engaged in classroom instruction and theory review



Automotive repair labs combining instruction with hands-on practice



Engine teardown and assembly training for advanced diagnostics



Residential construction mock-up for HVAC and systems training



Welding booth equipped with professional-grade Lincoln Electric equipment