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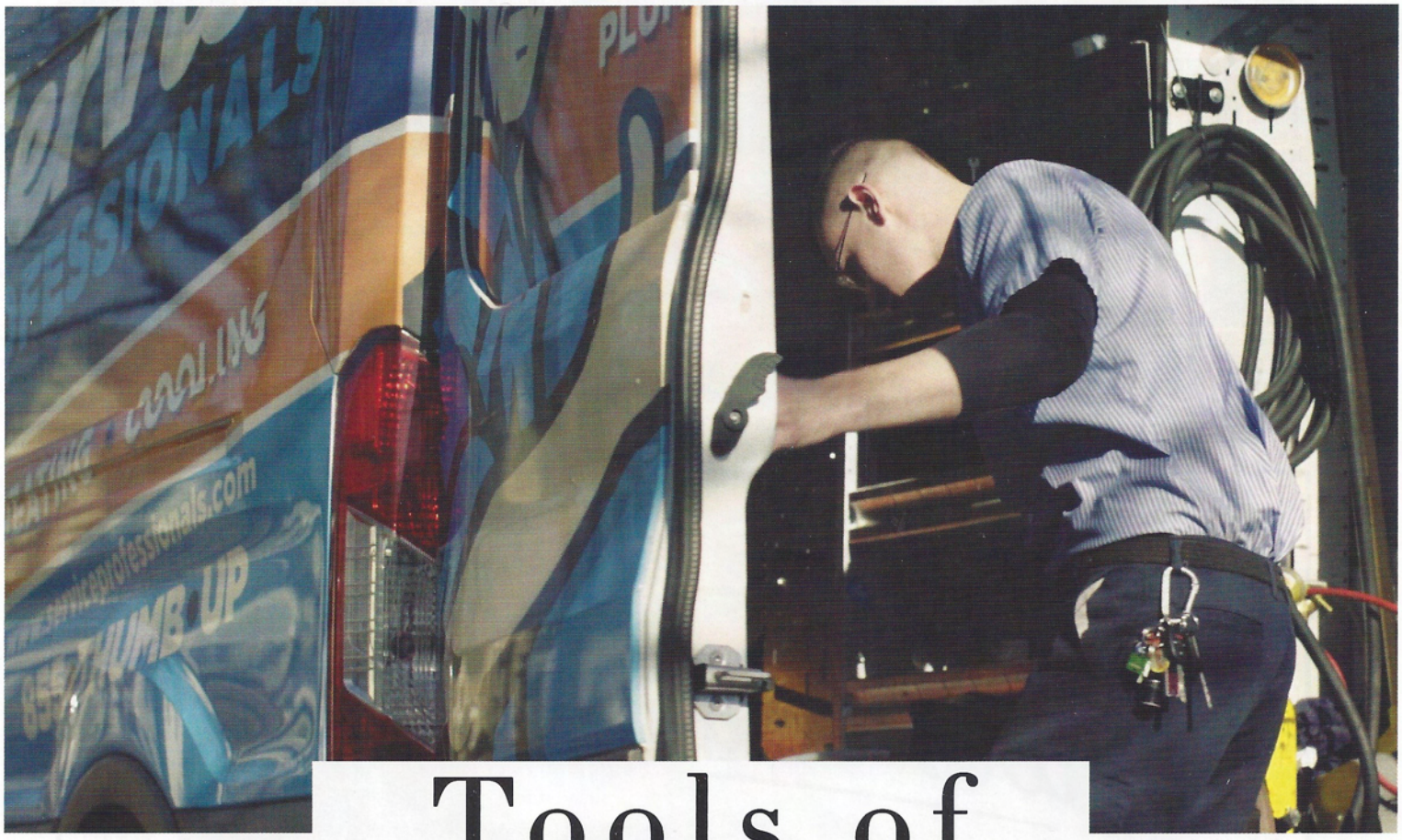


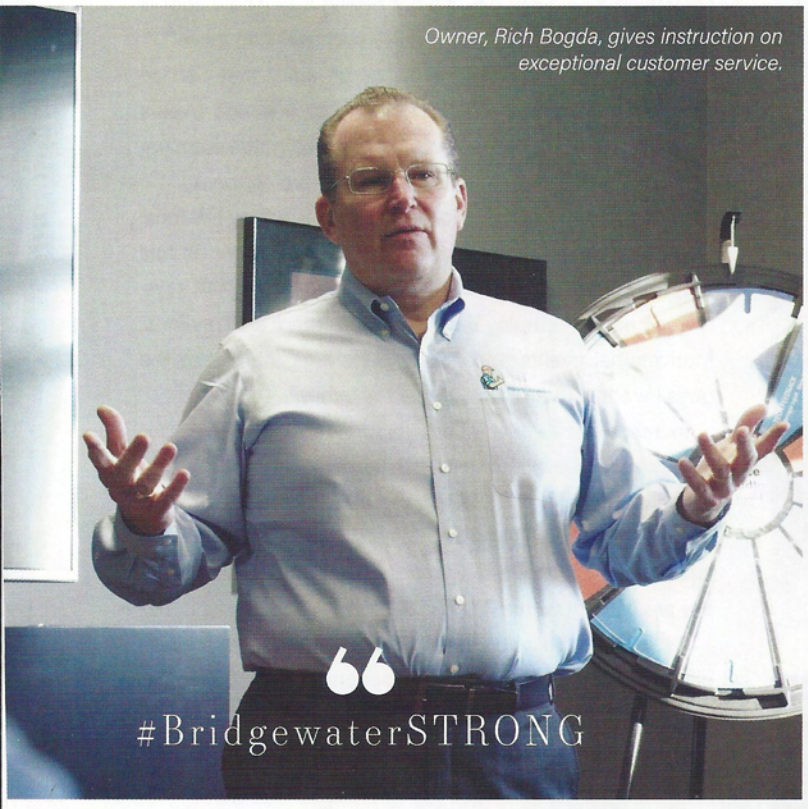
Tools of the Trade

VICTOR GRASSO DISCOVERED A LIFE-LONG CAREER — AND A TRUE WORK FAMILY— WHEN HE EMBARKED ON AN APPRENTICESHIP AT SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

VICTOR GRASSO, 22, A 2016 GRADUATE OF BRIDGEWATER-RARITAN HIGH SCHOOL, DID NOT WANT A CAREER THAT WOULD MEAN SITTING IN AN OFFICE ALL DAY. As commencement loomed, the athletic Victor began considering a job that would allow him to work with his hands and build a successful future. Although he had never given it much thought before, he began considering the trades—plumbing and HVAC specifically.

He approached family friend, Rich Cooper, who was a plumbing specialist at Service Professionals—a Union-based company that provides plumbing, heating, cooling, and electrical services to residents in North and Central New Jersey—to find out more about the job Rich talked so fondly about.

Victor Grasso listens intently during a training course.



Owner, Rich Bogda, gives instruction on exceptional customer service.

"Our state is made up of strong-willed, hardworking and resilient individuals like Victor. There is no challenge that we back away from including this one. We will make it through this and come out with a stronger community on the other side. We are #BridgewaterSTRONG"—Rich Bogda, Owner Service Professionals

"Service Professionals was a well-established company that had a reputation for training employees well," Victor says. "I wanted to learn more."

He scheduled an interview and was upfront that his knowledge of plumbing, heating and cooling was limited.

"That did not bother them," he says. "I told them that I was a hard worker, good with my hands and loyal—that I'd do whatever they needed me to do.'"

Matt Polny, Operations Manager at Service Professionals, says that inexperienced but ambitious and hard-working people like Victor are highly sought after.

"We take those guys and mold them on the job by reinforcing and constantly coaching them to build their confidence," he says.

Apprentices are trained from the ground up, starting in the warehouse learning parts, stocking trucks and doing deliveries.

Matt explains, "Then, they begin to step into the field, progressing as they establish themselves as a good worker."

A SOLID CAREER

Employment in the trades is projected to grow to 169.4 million jobs over the next decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many young people, like Victor, eyeing the rising tuition costs of attending college and the thought of graduating with crushing student debt are seeking good-paying fields in the trades where they can serve as an apprentice for years, earn a paycheck and attend classes in their field of choice.

Matt, who has been in plumbing close to 30 years, reiterates the stability of the trades as a career.

"As an essential service, this is a job that will not go away. Also, there is a shortage of people, which means the ability to earn has increased."

The apprenticeship at Service Professionals is a five-year program, during which employees work at the company to gain experience hours while attending classes at night, then take a test to get their license if they choose.

For his first three years, Victor worked as an HVAC installer under the guidance of seasoned veteran Michael Flynn, who taught him the ropes. From September to April, he attended a training class every Wednesday night at Hunterdon County Polytech.

"It's wonderful to start out as an installer because you have someone with you—called the lead — who tells you what to do and watches over you. If you have a great teacher as I did, it can change your whole life."

As his skills increased, Victor was asked if he would like to work as a service technician who fixes systems and gives homeowners solutions to upgrade their systems.

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> "I cannot thank Rich enough for the investment he has put into me and giving me a life-changing career."—Victor Grasso, Service Professionals

"As a young professional you want to keep moving forward. Service Professionals had trust in me, which gave me more confidence," he says. "What I like most about the job is doing something new every day. It's not having a routine. Labor is not just a job for me; it's work I enjoy because I can move."

Victor also appreciates the sense of family that Service Professionals cultivates. The company, in business over a quarter-century and with about 65 employees, puts a premium on helping staff grow personally as well as professionally.

Matt credits the owner, Richard Bogda, for setting this tone.

"I cannot thank Rich enough for the investment he has put into me and giving me a life-changing career," he says. "We do not just employ people for jobs; there are trainings, motivational events and social gatherings that make the guys I work with an extension of my family."

In response to the recent pandemic, Rich says, "Our state is made up of strong-willed, hardworking and resilient individuals like Victor. There is no challenge that we back away from including this one. We will make it through this and come out with a stronger community on the other side. We are #BridgewaterSTRONG."

As one of the youngest employees, Victor expresses gratitude for the closeness he experiences with the team.

"Despite our age differences, we are good friends. In normal times we have gatherings, go bowling and hang out," he says.

What Victor finds most gratifying is the fact his job is to make people's lives better.

"I feel like a hero because we help homeowners in need, providing heat, hot water and electricity," he says.

Sometimes, the days are long—the longest being an 8 a.m. to 2 a.m. workday and back up to report again at 8 a.m.—but knowing that he helped a customer out makes him feel happy.

Five years from now, Victor sees himself still working at Service Professionals.

"They take care of their employees, treat us like family and give us great benefits," he says. "I am recruiting. No matter your age, if you have a good work ethic, I'd love to have you as part of the team."

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