

Keefe students put green thinking to work

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By Jessica Turetz
SPECIAL TO THE TAB

The staggering prices at the pump have energy conservation awareness at the forefront of our everyday lives.

While cars have introduced hybrids, home building is turning green, with the focus on building energy-efficient homes.

Last Friday, students from Framingham's Joseph P. Keefe School attended the "I-SMART" Massachusetts Technical School Outreach Learning Exchange, an all day showcase held at the Best Western in Marlborough intended to emphasize the latest energy efficient building. Students from 10 area technical schools participated in hands-on demonstrations, including solar energy systems and learning to seal "duct dogs."

Keefe was honored at a luncheon following the program for building the school's first Energy Star rated home.

Energy Star is the Environmental Protection Agency's voluntary labeling program designed to identify and promote energy-efficient products to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Energy Star label is now on numerous appliances and lighting as well as new homes and commercial and industrial buildings.

Organizer Paul Wolff, the technical school outreach manager for the Conservation Services Group says the building of this house, a yearly project at Keefe, makes the students more employable. Among the revolutionary techniques the kids are using on the house are cellulose installation and a solar electric system.

"Just the fact that they are going to build their first energy star rated home is huge, said Wolff.

Organizers of the event say students are prime candidates for learning about green building, as construction industry veterans have been less receptive.

"We've noticed a lot of builders are very resistant to even small changes," Wolff says. "Construction is a unique industry ... if the veteran that you learned from wasn't aware of these things, than you wouldn't be," he said.

Wolff praised Keefe instructors Paul Monroe, head of the home building program, and Mike Newell for their enthusiasm and guidance in learning the new, more environmentally-friendly approaches to construction.

Monroe says kids understand conservation and acknowledges the resistance of the "old school" builders. "Vinyl siding finally made it," he joked. "This is the Northeast."

"Five or 6 years ago, we planted a seed," said Jerry Hanna, who oversees the energy star homes program for National Grid utility and is a passionate backer of the program. "We fill in the gap of the curriculum," he said.

More than just a day off from regular classes, the students were genuinely excited and surprised by the hands-on nature of the workshops. "I'm excited, I expected people to lecture us ... but its hands on ... awesome," said 17-year-old Brett McCurdy.

"I had no clue how to do a solar panel, but now I know how," he said.

Fellow junior Chase Piedra learned how to apply paint. "We got here at 8:45, I've been to all the stations," said Piedra.

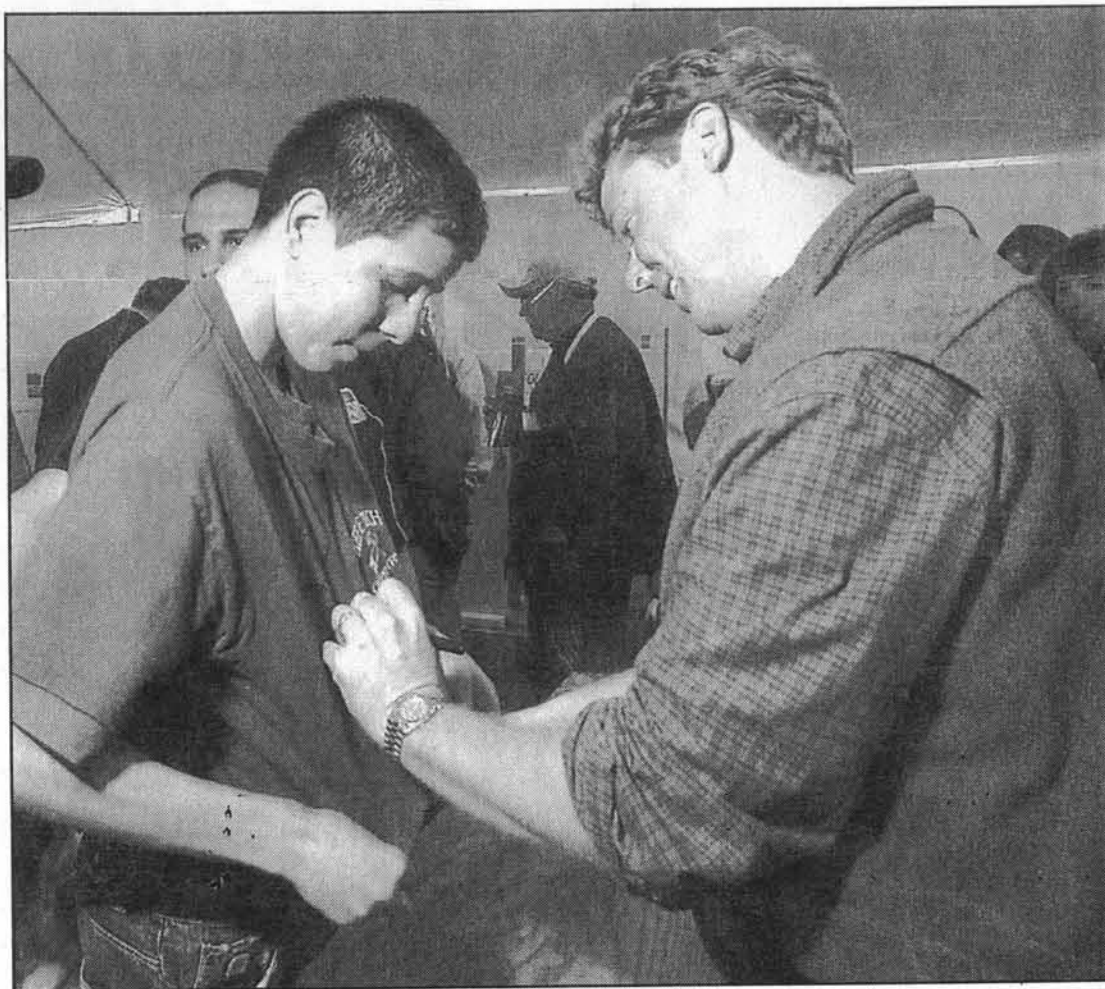
Wolff said the goal of the day is to show the students systems and fresh developments they wouldn't otherwise get to see in the classroom, such as "funky new technologies," and Foard board panels.

Wolff adds that with the increase in energy prices, people are starting to listen more to the message of green building. He says spending money on education for this next generation of builders is well worth the investment.

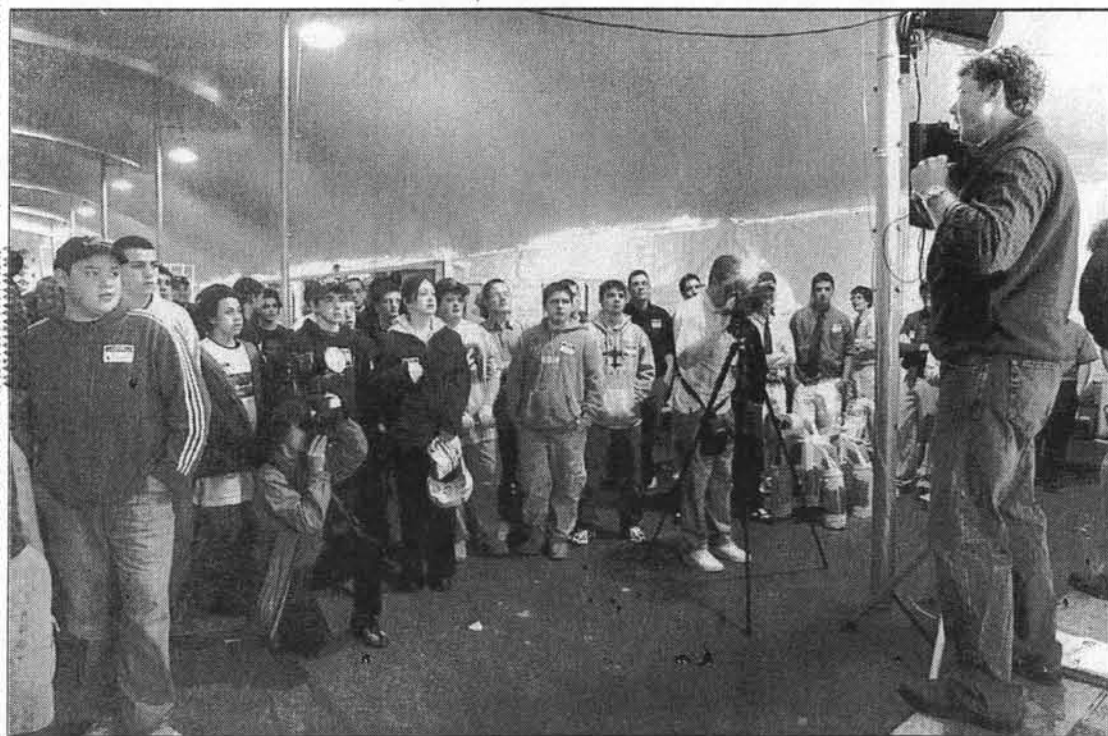
"Kids are open minded," he said. "They will be building ... they will have their own companies."



Keefe Tech junior Brett McCurdy of Framingham powers up a bank of compact fluorescent bulbs by riding a bicycle at the SkillsUSA vocational schools conference last Friday at Best Western Royal Trade Center & Hotel in Marlborough. They were set up to demonstrate how much more efficient CFBs are over regular incandescent bulbs which would not have lit up as easily.



"This Old House" host Kevin O'Connor signs Keefe Tech junior Albert Puma's T-shirt at the trade center.



"This Old House" host Kevin O'Connor addresses the vocational students before signing autographs at the trade center at the SkillsUSA vocational schools conference last Friday.