

# Mining for the future of industry

*Mining and Petroleum Training Service, Alaska EXCEL focus on educating the next generation*



*Contributed Photos by Martha Peck*

**MAPTS teaches job skills, even the cleanup, as Cory Okitkun found out with a very close education with a pressure washer.**

**BY MARTHA PECK**

*For The Alaska Miner*

How many 18-year-olds do you know who have graduated from a surface mine training program?

Recently eight teenagers — seven young men and one young woman — graduated with the hands on experience to begin careers in mining.

They graduated from Mining and Petroleum Training Service (MAPTS), a University of Alaska program offering training in not only surface mining, but underground mining, just outside Delta Junction.

MAPTS has a facility unlike any in the world, offering training to adults looking to break into the field or enhance the skills of those already in the trade. It is modeled and set up just like functioning mining camps, and has all the equipment one would find in either of the two mining scenarios.

The students hail from areas of Alaska primed for mining with exploration and/or permitting in the works with Donlin Gold, Graphite One, Tower Hills International and Trilogy. These areas can also be known for being economically depressed as well as educationally disadvantaged.

Donlin Gold in particular honors their commitment of education and supportive advocacy as demonstrated through their ongoing partnership with Alaska

EXCEL. Shared values are reflected through a mutual commitment to excellence, meeting common goals while honoring shared values, and more important, remaining committed while making a positive contribution and difference every day.

These students don't have the opportunities urban students are afforded, there are few options for anything beyond basic education in rural Alaska. EXCEL students are the youngest cohorts of students to earn certificates of completion from the MAPTS program, thanks to the creative thinking of the directors of Alaska EXCEL and MAPTS.

The nonprofit organization, Alaska EXCEL, has taken on the challenge of offering students opportunity and in making a difference in the lives of youth in more than 30 rural villages.

Beginning with 7th graders and working up through recent high school graduates, EXCEL arranges opportunities to not only enhance their education, but to help them bring out the best of each individual. With strict guidelines around personal habits (alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are strictly forbidden) students can focus on academics and trades. In this instance, the students focused on surface mining.

The course starts with some rigorous training in safety. The trades are a culture of safety and mining is no different. Each student must arrive

**For more information about Alaska EXCEL, the districts and students served and the curriculum, contact EXCEL's executive director, Carol Wilson at [cwilson@excelalaska.org](mailto:cwilson@excelalaska.org) or visit us at [www.excelalaska.org](http://www.excelalaska.org).**

with a pair of steel-toed boots and each is issued a hard hat, coveralls, safety glasses and a high-visibility vest upon arrival. From there, Darin, the safety instructor, leads them through the expectations and starts them on a routine to make sure they stay safe as well as keeping their classmates from harm's way.

They then move into learning to operate the heavy equipment. Trusting the students with basic safety, now is the time to teach the students to drive some fairly specialized equipment. Most of these 18-year-old had already earned their drivers' license or permit, through a program with EXCEL, however two only had learner permits and had never actually driven a car. Remember, they are from rural Alaska, from villages where the transportation is 4-wheeler or snow machine. It's a pretty fast education to learn to climb a story high into the driver's seat of a CAT 769D haul truck.

Also, on site is a Cat D5 dozer, a front-end loader, a Case 34B Haul Truck, a telehandler and a number of other specialized pieces of equipment, most of which

are generously loaned indefinitely to the program by Brice Construction. Each student gains time in the seat of every piece of equipment and each finds they have an affection for one of those large machines.

Interspersed in the curriculum are personal and team-building exercises. These students find things out about themselves they never knew. Some had never talked in front of a group. Most have never been an employee and all graduated from high school a mere week ago.

When Bill Bieber, MAPTS director, was approached by EXCEL to take on the challenge of working with a cohort of 18-year-olds, he and his team were somewhat hesitant. They had, up until this point, never worked with a group completely made up of individuals so young. But these students had been given an excellent foundation, attending a number of camps with EXCEL prior to this experience. Held not only in rural Alaska, but in Anchorage, Seward, and Soldotna, these camps gave these young adults basic skills to help make them successful.

Rural Alaska is a different culture. Many of the students have never traveled outside their villages. Coming to an urban setting is terrifying for many and EXCEL provides a safe, ever-broadening set of

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**The EXCEL/MAPTS 2019 graduates from left to right: Jeremiah Henry (Huslia), Cory Okitkun (Kotlik), Keshawn Keyes (Kotlik), Jonathan Waska (Kotlik), Arnold Simon (Hooper Bay), Shane Mike (Kotlik), Sinka Atchak (Chevak), and Beulah Boy Scout (Chevak).**

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experiences for a significant number of students. seventh-graders will be in camp for four days. Some find themselves distraught with homesickness. It's common and the EXCEL staff is trained and experienced in dealing with these situations. Several of them have been through the program themselves. EXCEL grows their own.

The MAPTS team of instructors rose to the challenge. They run the program as if they are at a functioning, producing mining camp. The expectations of these young trainees were exactly the same as the older attendees. As it turns out, the biggest challenge was to wean them from their cell phones. There is no place for such distractions in a classroom, much less on a piece of heavy equipment at a mine site.

As the days progressed, each student gained more and more experience and each found they gained something unexpected within themselves.

Self-confidence was a major byproduct of this program, and it showed. Towards the end of their time at MAPTS, they competed amongst themselves, moving large rocks and crushed rock to see who could perform each given task the fastest and with the most efficiency. In the loader, every single one of the students could perform the requested task faster than the fastest of the previous class made up of older students. In the fork-lift, the young drivers were able to place rocks more precisely and more quickly than in many classes before them.

At graduation, each student stood next to one piece of heavy equipment and explained to the audience for what task each is used and how to perform a safety

check prior to entering the cockpit. When their name was called to accept their certificate of completion of the course, Director Bieber asked them to tell everyone something about themselves they had learned over the duration of their two-week training period. Most articulated they had not only gained the ability to speak in front of a group but were proud to do so.

Following the graduation, each of the eight students left looking forward to the two weeks of paid apprenticeship ahead. All were headed to Anchorage to dip their toe into the pool of work experience.

Bilista Holding LLC, Yukon Equipment, and Granite Construction all held spots for the new graduates/EXCEL interns to find out more about going to work. They all started their internships the next morning, bright and early. Now, with 2 weeks of training and 2 weeks of paid apprenticeship behind them, two of the graduates will be working with Donlin Gold LLC as drillers' assistants. Two are bound for college in the fall. One has his sights set on the Air Force, learning about the GI Bill and how it can help with tuition. A sixth has submitted a resume and cover letter at the request of Sam Brice to go to work for him, the location has yet to be determined. Still others have applications pending for other endeavors beyond MAPTS and EXCEL such as AVTEC, Job Corps, University of Alaska, and more.

The "future history" of Alaska's mining industry is alive and well with education from EXCEL's dedicated and talented staff and their willingness to go the extra mile and go off the grid. With EXCEL's partnerships, opportunities and training such as the MAPTS Capstone for rural Alaskan youth would not be so readily available.