

Sheet Metal Workers Local 137

A century of signmaking

By Louis M. Brill

For a century, NYC's Sheet Metal Workers Local 137 members have installed most of the signs, awnings, banners, billboards and spectaculars that cover Times Square, Manhattan, Long Island, and the rest of New York and New Jersey.

A force unto itself, the union emphasizes the three E's: employment, education and empowerment. This triangular foundation supports Local 137's efforts to build a strong membership (currently 700) of workers skilled in designing, fabricating and installing signage throughout the NYC metropolitan area. In maintaining its worker base, the union reinforces the teaching of the sign craft with on-the-job training. Apprentices learn signmaking basics and advance to skills required for fabricating and installing signs on billboards, buildings and skyscrapers, or on roadsides.

Peter Scaglione, training coordi-

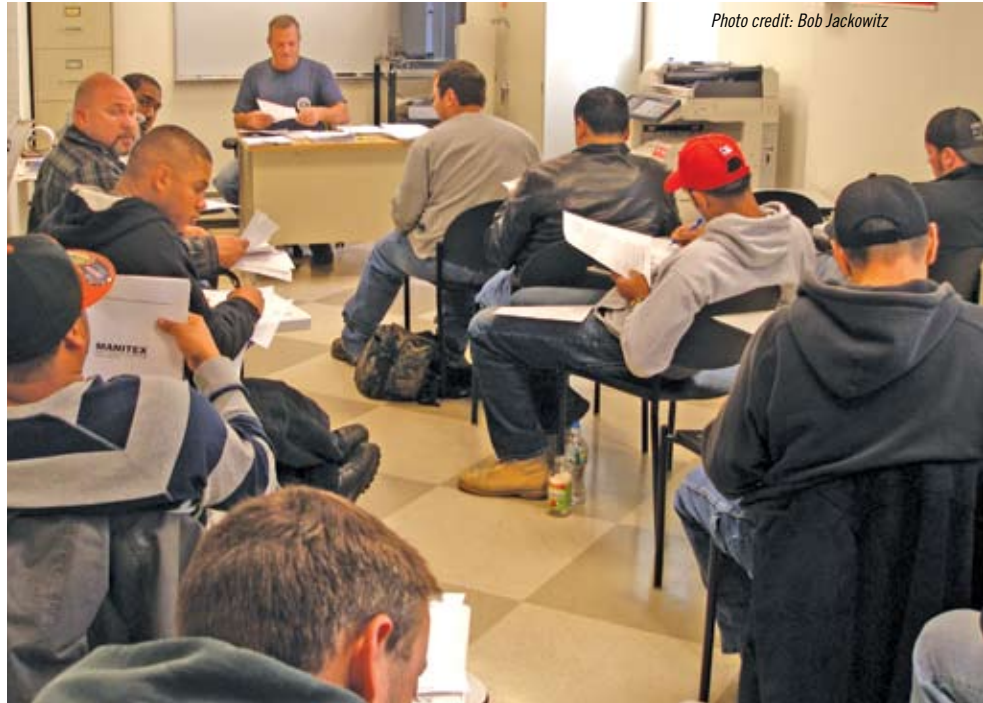


Photo credit: Bob Jackowitz

nator for the Local 137 apprenticeship program, said members who graduate as journeymen hold approximately 19 licenses and certifications. This includes 10-hour and 30-hour OSHA licenses; an

American Welding Society certification; a commercial driver's license; varying scaffold licenses; an aerial-lift certification; and a New York State crane license.

The first leg of Local 137 training is summarized by "empowerment is employment." Only people working at union signshops can participate in the training program, which is conducted in the union's training center in Long Island City. Entry to the training program requires new hires (ranging between 18 to 25 years) to possess a valid driver's license; a high-school diploma or GED equivalent; and be interviewed to establish their English, math and reading proficiencies.

From applicant to apprentice

The training program assumes an apprentice knows little about signmaking. Approved applicants begin an extensive curriculum that comprises approximately 800 hours (spanning five years) of classroom and fieldwork to acquire



Photo credit: Bob Jackowitz

Local 137 apprentices gain familiarity with the computer as a signmaking tool.



Photo credit: Bob Jackowitz



Photo credit: NorthShore Neon Sign Co.



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journeyman skills and licenses. The program currently has approximately 70 apprentices.

Bob Jackowitz, a VP at Artkraft Straus (NYC), instructs at the training center. Involved with the program since the early 1970s, he's taught many subjects (a sign-industry introduction, blueprint reading, sign hardware and industry-related math). He strives to instill all apprentices with signmaking skills, as well as the importance of safety in preparing for, and performing, their work.

"Every single thing we teach at our training center has strong elements of safety connected to it," Jackowitz said. "This includes the use of a personal-safety harness, work-space awareness, tool safety, and public safety around the work-site. Working with signs, in both fabrication and installation, is a dangerous business – from being around high-speed cutting and drilling tools to being 60 ft. up in the air, in a bucket, to bolting a sign structure to the side of a building. Danger, however, can be mitigated by setting and emphasizing safety precautions, not only for the sign men, but for the public space around their sign work."

The union's courses teach apprentices fabrication-related skills, such as creating and reading blueprints and welding.

Old-world to high-tech

Local 137's sign-building program is very specific and historically driven. Apprentices first learn the "old world" craft of hand-building sign letters and sign structures. As they master the original skills, they continue onwards, using more modern equipment, then learn computer-aided design (CAD), computer-assisted manufacturing (CAM), CNC computer numerically controlled (CNC) routing, computer-aided signmaking (CAS) and other related programs.

Scaglione said, "In the old days,

sign men used to specialize in either fabrication or installation. Today's journeymen still can choose what they prefer in their work environment, but, as apprentices-in-training, we teach them everything about sign fabrication and installation, so our members have the best skills possible for whatever work demands they encounter on a job site."

Because apprentices work during the week at their sign jobs, training classes are held eight hours every Saturday for a 16-week semester. Extensive and exacting



Photo credit: NorthShore Neon Sign Co.

A team from Northshore Neon, a member of Local 137, positions final letters of “Stadium” into place at Yankee Stadium.

detail hardly begins to describe what they learn:

- *10-hour and 30-hour OSHA training classes* teach electrical safety, fall safety, fall hazards, use of personal-protection equipment, and work and tool safety.
- *The sheetmetal program*, a comprehensive, five-year program, teaches fabricating metal into letters and sign cabinets to sculptured shapes. Classroom instruction incorporates making hand-drawn layouts (from simple to complex), learning to utilize the power of computers and, finally, creating the work with the use of “hands on” experience.
- *The wire-rope, manila-rope, knots and rigging class* includes working with rope and wire cables to lift and lower heavy loads; learning about hoists and pulleys; understanding mechanical advantage; learning about manila rope and wire-rope limits against weight loads; and learning how to use knots and rigging to lift signs and materials from the ground to a wall or top of a building.



Photo credit: NorthShore Neon Sign Co.

- *Scaffolds and platforms classes* show how to set up a block-and-tackle rigging for a scaffold, and how to set up and operate an electric-motor-driven scaffold.
- *Welding instruction* covers stick and MIG/TIG welding. Welding theory is taught in classroom sessions and practiced in fully equipped welding booths on the premises. This fully accredited program, with the capacity to conduct welding-certification tests, has turned out many certified welders. Future training classes will cover plasma arc welding, which teaches how to weld different metals to connect a sign structure to a building or structural sign support.
- *Blueprint reading* includes learning to understand and inter-

pret construction drawings (as related to the proposed sign work); finding a project’s key components, such as locating columns, beams and stubs; drawing sketches accurately so that signs and supports can be fabricated for a project; and seeing and understanding a project in three dimensions.

- *Crane operation* teaches the safe operation of various types of sign-industry cranes. Again, classroom instruction, mechanical instruction and operating instructions emphasize safety. Operators/teachers are well-trained, licensed professionals.

On the fabrication side, apprentices learn to work with various materials (wood, metal and



Photo credit: NorthShore Neon Sign Co.

plastic). They begin by hand-fabricating channel letters (upper and lower cases, facing and reverse-facing letters), and learning how to build, from scratch, the client's commissioned sign structure. Apprentices build everything from channel letters and cornices to actual, sign-mounting structures.

Local 137 currently provides work to at least 35 union signshops in the NYC metropolitan area. Scaglione said the union definitely has been affected by the downward economy. "In 2009, I had 100 apprentices in my training program. Now, a year later, I have 70 apprentices. Less work means less employment, and we're not able to hire as many new workers as we did a year ago."

However, the training program is as strong as ever. The curriculum continues to keep up with the sign industry's new sign regulations, sign laws and fabricating techniques. Scaglione said, "We see many of our journeymen returning to our training center. They come for opportunities to update their education and keep up with new, technical, signmaking developments. They also can take advanced classes to renew expired licenses and certifications."

From bosun's chair to boom truck

As the sign industry evolves, it readily embraces the latest technical changes that engender new tools and techniques. President Paul Collins said the union has always championed making sign work easier, more efficient and safer.

Collins, who's been with Local 137 since 1973, remembers earlier decades when most sign work was done by hand. "Everything in those days was manual, from cutting materials for designing sign parts to onsite installations, where, once the trucks were parked, the outriggers were set by hand.

"Since then, we've gone from sitting on the side of a building in a bosun's chair to using boom trucks, whose reach and maneuverability is fantastic in terms of getting signmen to the sides or top of a sign," Collins continued. "Technology is very much a part of what we're about, and much of it has greatly enhanced how we do our jobs," he said. Collins noted how such technological advancements as hydraulics, rotor hammers, impact guns and multiplier wrenches; computers and LED technology for displays and for sign lighting; and CAS and CAD/CAM software changes, have affected sign-industry

professionals' work habits.

"Whether we're fabricating or installing signs, we always have the latest resources available to work with," Collins said. "Right now, we're on the verge of setting up a plasma-cutting workstation to get our members familiar with that. One day, when robotics becomes available at our level as a sign-fabricating resource, we'll be ready for that as well."

A sign legacy

The union has left its mark throughout Times Square (billboards and spectaculars); Yankee Stadium and Citi Field (billboards and banners); and Kennedy Airport (wayfinding and advertising). Union members have also helped restore several beloved NYC landmarks, such as Harlem's Apollo Theater (marquee and blade sign), Nathan's (blade sign and assorted building signs) and the New Year's Eve Time Ball drop in Times Square.

The union faces never-ending work – signs installed by a former generation of members are "adjusted" by newer members in succeeding years. Signs themselves may be static, but they're always rebuilt, moved or replaced with new signage.

The public, serving as "sidewalk supervisors," watches sign installations progress from trucks delivering sign parts to cranes lifting and lowering signs on building. They see boom trucks swirl as union members hover around the signs, bolting them to the side of a building, a rooftop or a skyscraper. Even though they may see the result as a ballet "mechanique," they may never fully realize all the training, skill and caution that's invested into the placement of every sign's new, street-side home. Not only do the signs show off their unique advertising, but they also display the union's work on a great stage, the streets of New York. ■

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