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## **When the final bell rings at 2 a.m.**

By Andy Parker  
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At midnight, a darkened Clackamas Community College campus sits silent, a curtain of rain washing across the expanse of parking lots that by day struggle to hold the school's bulging student population.

But in the far back corner of the campus, middle-aged sedans and pickups line the curb of a metal building where 18 students are clawing their way up from the very edge of America's fraying economy.

It's the college's fledgling graveyard shift, a 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. welding class. Started as experiment last spring, it was so popular an extra section was opened this semester.

Monday through Thursday nights, just as the campus seems to be closing down, a steady stream of cars pours through the college's rear entrance to Training Center 2.

On this night, 18 students don welding helmets and slip into the solitary world of the welding booth.

Some are employed, some not. Some are experienced welders, some are first-timers. They're all here looking to improve their skills and their pay. Some are working toward the holy grail of the trade -- pipe welding, a tedious level of grueling work realized only by maybe one in 100 welders, guesses their instructor, John Phelps.

Other than asking for a tip from instructors Phelps and Dave Williams, there is virtually no chatting. These are people serious about pushing forward, some against overwhelming odds.

There's an unemployed mother trying to pick up a new trade. A skilled welder living in his truck while trying to keep up his welding certifications as he waits for work. A teen-age kid from Alaska who came looking for a career after tiring of "40-mile drives to work when it's minus 40 outside."

There's a middle-aged guy trying to work his way off the streets. A father laid off from construction work looking to better his skills. A skilled journeyman from the Ukraine looking to up his chances of finding a job to feed his wife and kids.

Many of them offered only first names, but all were willing to share the depth of their struggles.

A young guy who identified himself as Rupert works up to 14 hours a day, six days a week at a local canning factory while taking several classes at the college.

"It's hard," he said, "but I'm toughening it out, you know, doing the best I can."

Rupert's classmate, Justin, knows those kinds of hours well. He works during the day, then sneaks home for some food and a two-hour nap before class. By the time he wraps up things here and gets home, he's lucky to get another two or three hours sleep before the cycle restarts.

The teacher is revered by his students as instructor, mentor and guide. There's a reason for that, he says – "I've been there."

After graduating from Oregon City High, he bumped around a variety of industrial jobs but could never crack the \$15-an-hour ceiling.

Ten years later, he enrolled at the college, earned his degree and immediately started working as an instructional assistant teaching welding, which led to his current part-time teaching position.

Grant Mitchell, an independent dump-truck driver by day, said without the late-night time-slot, there's no way he could find time for the schooling he hopes will eventually land him work as certified welder.

Wayne is middle-aged, clean-cut guy who'd always considered metal-working a hobby. Then the economy tanked and he lost his job as a production coordinator for a national construction firm.

Now he searches for work by day and works on his welding skills by night. Despite his bad luck, he refuses to look back.

"I'm loving this," he said. "I really appreciate John and Dave. They want us to succeed, all of us. They're in it for us. I'm proud to be here."