

# Celebrating National Manufacturing Day

*November 2016*

On October 7, 2016, our community, along with countless others in this nation, celebrated National Manufacturing Day. Manufacturing Day is an annual day designated by presidential proclamation to celebrate the contribution manufacturing has made to our country and to inspire young people to seek careers in manufacturing. Because Whitfield County is a global manufacturing hub staffed by local workers, we have an opportunity to address common misperceptions about modern manufacturing to show what it is and what it is not.

I grew up in a manufacturing community where the main products were fabric and rugs. It was pretty much accepted that most of our community's young people would graduate from high school and go to work in either the rug mill or the cotton mill. At that time, many students chose to drop out of high school and begin work in the local mills as soon as they were of legal age.

My mother and grandparents all worked in the mills their entire adult lives. They retired after 40 years of hard labor. My husband used to work in the cotton mill each summer to supplement his teaching salary. I thought that I had a pretty good idea of what it was like to work in manufacturing. I based my opinion on my family's experience and one visit to the cotton mill when I was in high school. During that field trip, the sound of the machinery inside the cotton mill was deafening and the plant was dirty. It was even hard for me to breathe because of the lint in the air. This was in the days before safety goggles and ear plugs were required, so my mother and my grandparents retired with damaged hearing. These experiences convinced me that I wanted nothing to do with manufacturing, but times have certainly changed.

Fast forward to National Manufacturing Day 2016. We kicked off the day at the Career Academy with a panel of four executives talking about the importance of manufacturing. They discussed employment opportunities available in manufacturing here in our own community and around the world. Manufacturing offers employment opportunities in areas many do not immediately associate with working in manufacturing. Nurses, chemists, attorneys, designers, engineers, accountants, and just about every other field of work will find careers available in manufacturing. Salaries are very competitive and there are many paths for advancement.

Following the panel discussion, guests toured local manufacturing facilities. The things that I saw on the tours looked nothing like the cotton mill I visited in high school. The facilities are clean, quiet, and welcoming. The workforce is more highly skilled and the equipment they run requires specialized knowledge. Technology and automation are at the heart of everything in the plants today. The machinery does the work under employees' supervision and no one has dirty hands or dirty clothes. High quality products are being produced efficiently and prepared to ship to local customers or buyers anywhere in the world.

The highlight of my tour was getting to meet employees who had graduated from our area high schools and found careers in manufacturing. I was particularly excited to see them use their skills and talents right here in our own community. Some of them went to work right after high school while others went on to earn two-year technical diplomas or four-year degrees. Whatever their interests, talents, and education, these employees found good jobs available in manufacturing.

Manufacturing is vital to the financial stability of our local economy. According to the last census, manufacturing sales in Whitfield County exceeded \$4.4 billion. Our young people have wonderful opportunities for employment locally. Everyone in our community, including our schools, colleges, and industries, must continue to strengthen and expand our manufacturing base and to make young people aware of the challenging, exciting, well-paying jobs right here in our community. I encourage all of our young people to visit a manufacturing facility for a firsthand view of the excellent jobs available in Whitfield County.