

Teacher of the Month: Charles Casey

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN, BUTLER — “We take what the academic teachers teach and put it to practical use,” he says. “That’s what Career Tech is all about.”

This year marks the 4th year of his new career, a career that seems far removed from where he started, yet not so far after all. From a young boy with no idea what he wanted to do with his life to a sailor with a penchant for electronics to a teacher in the Choctaw County public schools, Charles Casey has run the gamut of experiences.

And it is those experiences that he now brings to the classroom as the electronics teacher for local high school students.

On weekday mornings, Casey can be found in the classroom at Choctaw County High School, teaching electronics to students enrolled in the Career Tech program. By afternoon, he travels to Southern Choctaw High to meet with electronics students in the south end of the county.

But, he says, whether at CCHS or SCHS, his classes are about more than just teaching kids electronics. Rather, like all Career Tech classes, they teach them about life.

“I want these kids to know that there are opportunities for them out there,” he says. “They just have to know where to find them and what to do with them.”

Casey’s passion for helping young people find their futures stems from his own experiences as a young high school graduate in the 1960’s.

“Like most of the students, when I graduated from high school I said, ‘O.K., what now?’” he recalls. “I didn’t have a clue what I was going to



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Teacher of the Month, Charles Casey, instructs his students at SCHS.

do.” Growing up in a poor Arkansas family with 8 siblings, Casey’s parents had no money to send him to college. After graduation, he went to work in a factory. But after a year, he made the decision that would change his life.

“I knew I didn’t want to work in the factory forever,” he remembers. “I decided to join the Navy.”

In the U.S. Navy, Casey began to learn a skill that would become a big part of his life. He studied electronics and soon became a master in the field, certified by 4 different organizations.

Casey worked with electronics in several capacities through the years, and at one time owned his own repair company.

When he reached his mid-50’s, he decided it was

time to move from his Memphis home to relocate in Choctaw County, the area where his wife, the former Sharon Roberts, had been raised.

“When we came here I saw an ad in the paper that said that the school system was looking for an electronics teacher,” he remembers. “I said, ‘Hey, I can do that.’”

At the age of 58, Casey found himself beginning a new career. Although he had his certification in electronics, he had to return to school to earn his certification to teach.

“I went to school online through Athens State,” he says. “I had 3 years to finish it.”

But even with his teaching certification, Casey was still not finished with his education. “Last year, we had

BIC (Business and Industry Certification) certification inspection,” he explains. “They come in and looked at everything you do. I had to go back and take a national electronics test to pass that inspection.”

Casey and his department passed BIC inspection that is required of all Career Tech courses in order to continue receiving federal funds for the programs.

But, he says, he has still not completed his learning process. It is, he explains, a process that goes on throughout life.

“That’s something I try to tell these students,” he says. “Learning is something you never stop doing.”

“It’s difficult for them to understand that you have to keep learning new skills,” he adds. “For example, if you depended on what you knew about computers three years ago, you would be outdated.”

In addition to his emphasis on learning new skills, Casey says that he stresses to his students the importance of working with others, and showing them respect — something that he sees as sorely lacking in today’s youth.

“These students don’t understand what it means to show others respect,” he says. “I try to show them how to work together in teams on projects so they will learn how to respect each other. I try to tell them that they may not like everyone, but they will have to work with other people so they had better learn to do it now.”

This week, Casey’s students are working together on a project to construct functioning robotic arms. Once completed, the arms will be

able to pick up and move objects by electronic control.

Although he acknowledges that most people think of electronics as primarily computer technology, he emphasizes that there is so much more than meets the eye.

“Computers are great,” he says. “But if you want to learn electronics, you need more than that. From digital cameras to your car, everything uses digital technology in some way, and in the future I believe we will see automobiles run by electric motors, powered by solar, and controlled digitally by computers.”

Casey also emphasizes the use of electronics in such fields as biomedical technology.

“In almost everything you can think of, you need to know about electronics,” he says.

And in almost everything he teaches, Casey says he stresses the importance of continuing to learn new skills.

“If they leave my class knowing that they have to keep learning no matter what they do and where they go,” he says, “then I think I’ve accomplished something.”

“Of course, we’d love for these students to stay in Choctaw County,” he admits. “But if they do go out there somewhere else, they need to know how to get along.”

And, Casey says, learning practical life skills are the most important part of all Career Tech programs.

“We talk about money with them,” he explains. “You try to get them ready for life.”

Casey cites one program in particular for helping to teach students about financial responsi-

bility. “My Skills Tutor is a program that is a scenario of all these things,” he says. “It teaches how to figure out a budget, about tax deductions, FICA, what to expect from your employer, and what your employer should expect from you. All Career Tech courses work together to teach these things.”

Although he admits that he never dreamed he’d be teaching high school students, Casey says that, at this point in his life, he can’t imagine doing anything else. It is a field that has its difficulties, he admits, but one that also has great rewards.

Drawing on his own experiences throughout the years, Casey says that he now sees a connection between what he learned as a student, his years in the Navy, and his life as a teacher today.

“I took trig in high school and I just couldn’t get it,” he relates. “My teacher kept working with me and working with me, but I struggled. Then when I was learning electronics in the Navy, all the things he taught me came together. About 10 years later, I saw that teacher and he asked me what I was doing. When I told him I was in electronics, he couldn’t believe it, and I told him about how I had remembered what he taught me.”

“I think that if I could hear something like that from one of my students somewhere down the line,” he adds, “I will feel like I have done my job.”

“I enjoy what I do,” he adds. “I love these students. I think that if you teach the best you can and try your best to reach them, everything else will fall into place.”

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