



BLUE COLLAR TO COLLEGE: ATHENA SALDIA FINDS HER PATH THROUGH WELDING

Braswell High School graduate Athena Saldia has been accepted into the welding engineering program at The Ohio State University, one of the country's most prestigious welding schools.

Educational experts can't agree on the total percentage of high school students that prefer a kinesthetic, or hands-on, learning style, but Athena Saldia knew she identified as one of them.

Athena is a senior at Braswell High School, part of the Denton ISD (independent school district) in Aubrey, Texas. She plays in the orchestra, is involved with the National Honor Society and has earned leadership roles as a cadet in the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (AFJROTC). However, she found a home and her future because of Braswell's welding program.

"I work best as a hands-on learner and perform at my best while doing something I'm passionate about," says Athena. "I originally wanted hands-on work like carpentry or woodworking, but Braswell didn't have those courses. Fortunately, welding was another great opportunity."

GOOD COUNSEL

While Athena favors hands-on learning, there's no doubt she also embraces a whole learning style framework, which also includes visual and auditory learning. In fact, she has been accepted into the welding engineering program at The Ohio State University, one of the country's most prestigious schools.

"I jumped up and down with excitement because I know how hard Athena worked," says Braswell welding instructor Taylor Alcorn.

Taylor leads two classes, Introduction to Welding and Welding One, where students learn safety and the oxy-fuel, MIG and Stick welding processes. After Alcorn's classes, students who want to continue (like Athena did) travel to Denton ISD LaGrone Academy for Welding Two, which covers fluxed cored and TIG welding and reinforces MIG and Stick.

"I try to build a student who is a quality welder, but the goal for me is to help students know what their career options are," says Taylor. "There are so many other ways for them to explore the industry, including welding engineering and all the technical careers around welding like inspection."

Taylor's encouragement and guidance are exactly what Athena needed.

"Throughout my life, I didn't have a set plan or set goal of what I wanted to do after high school. I kept procrastinating because I was anxious about it," says Athena. "Fortunately, Ms. Alcorn made us fill out these career path papers my sophomore year. I didn't have much to write. She brought up welding engineering as an option and I found Ohio State. I really do enjoy my science and math courses. I feel like if I'm combining those with what I'm passionate about, which is welding, I could set my future on the correct path."

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BEING A LEADER

Taylor describes Athena as motivated, dedicated and talented.

"She asked questions about everything. I always tell my students they will do better if they ask more questions and learn from mistakes," says Taylor. "When Athena started in Welding One, she became an instant leader, always helping keep everyone on track and making sure that things were done in a timely manner."

Athena says that, through her AFJROTC participation, she learned leadership, human and civil skills.

"I can connect being a cadet with welding because there are times in welding where I was discouraged, but using what I learned in AFJROTC, I was able to apply that in welding as well," she says.

Athena believes she serves as a role model for other young women who are interesting in welding or being a cadet.

"Welding and JROTC are male dominated fields, but I feel like I've left my mark here at Braswell as someone other females could look up to," she says. "There are times people will diss on you for being a girl or for no reason, even though we're in the same grade, the same age. We're all human, but they're just dissing you because of one minor difference. What really keeps me going is just having that positive mindset to keep pushing and don't let other people affect my work ethic or my performance."

Athena's advice for students who don't know what they want to do after high school is to be curious about things that appeal to you, whether that's welding or trying out for the school musical.

"Join a technical class or anything like that. I feel like by trying different things, you open more opportunities for your future."



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