

“It’s amazing. You’d think these guys have been here forever...”

Dennis Steffy said he’s never seen anything like it in the 38 years he’s been overseeing the state’s mine training programs. He’s never seen people assemble a mine training program so fast: deciding what needed to be taught, recruiting the students, arranging for the instructors, the classrooms, the funding – and a mine site so the students could experience the real thing, actually working 300 feet below ground.

He said it happened because a group of people from different agencies and Coeur Alaska Inc., the owner of the Kensington gold mine north of Juneau, got together with one thing in mind: to train people for the mine. Fast.

Steffy is the director of the University of Alaska’s Mining and Petroleum Training Service based at Kenai Peninsula College. He approached Ted Burke, then the head of the Juneau Job Center, last spring to see about putting a training planning team together. They got the team together and had the first mine training class in September – in record time.

It was so fast, and so efficient, that Steffy wants to use what the group accomplished in Juneau as a model not only for setting up mining programs in the rest of the state – at the Rock Creek mine in Nome and the possible Pebble mine near Lake Iliamna – but for potential future development in the oil and gas industry as well.

“It was as good as it could ever work right there,” he said.

Here’s how it unfolded: Steffy and Burke joined with Marquam George – a University of Alaska Southeast assistant professor who had been discussing mine training with Coeur for about a year – and others from the university, plus the Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development’s Division of Business Partnerships and the Berners Bay Consortium,

Rod Willard, Coeur Alaska’s geology manager at the Kensington mine, examines a high-grade gold and quartz vein in the mine in April 2005.

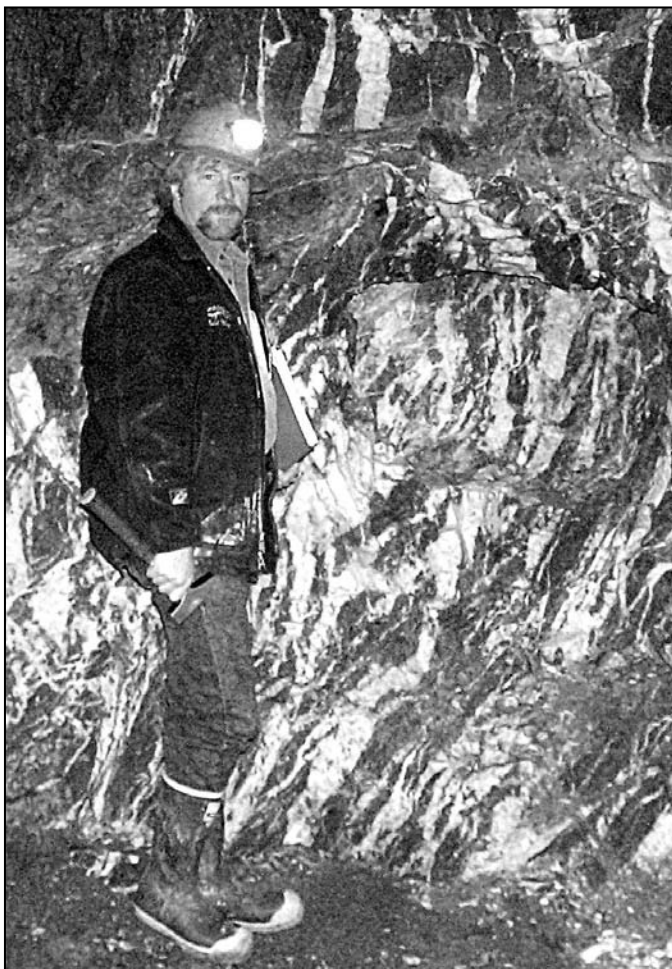


Photo by Jan Trigg, Coeur Alaska Inc.



Mine construction class students (above, left to right) Derek Antrim, Ryan Hamley, John Corazza and Caleb Hillyer install rafters and ridges to their “small buildings” last November at the UAS Technical Education Center in Juneau. Instructor Marquam George said the small buildings have the same components of regular-sized buildings; they’re just scaled-down versions.

“Nipper” class graduates – nippers are basically entry-level miners – and others (above right) watch the Feb. 24 nipper class graduation ceremony in a classroom converted from a gift shop at the Maggie Kathleen mine near Juneau, where the students worked in the mine as part of their training. Others pictured include people from the Juneau Job Center, Coeur Alaska, plus friends and relatives of the miners.

a group made up of the chief executive officers from Coeur and Native corporations Goldbelt, Kake Tribal and Klukwan.

Coeur already had an agreement with the Department of Labor to work together to recruit workers for the mine, which is in the construction phase now, and – if the process goes according to plan – will start processing ore in 2007. Coeur also had an agreement with the

other Berners Bay Consortium members that Coeur would strive for 13.5 percent of its construction work force to be members of the three Native corporations or their descendents and 25 percent of the production work force. The three corporations are big mine supporters.

“Dennis had heard about me, about the Department of Labor’s agreement with Coeur,” said Burke, now the assistant director of the department’s Employment Security Division. “We just hit it off when we met. He’s a mover and a shaker. He’s a miner, rough and tough. He just eats the stuff.

“I think we took the university by surprise. [The group] just didn’t fool around. We just all jelled. We each did our part and our fair share of making it happen,” Burke said, adding what seems to be his favorite motto: “Don’t be bureaucrats!”

“It was incredible,” said George, the UAS instructor. “All the players came together. It was a great meeting of needs.”



Photo by Jason Bluhm, Governor's Office

They got together eight instructors to teach three courses: an introduction to mining construction class, a U.S. Department of Labor Mine Safety and Health Administration safety certification class (miners pronounce the acronym as “M-sha”) and another class entitled, “Entry Level Underground Miner,” or “nipper” for short. (A nipper is someone in the first stage of becoming an underground production miner, one who moves and operates equipment to help hard-rock miners.¹)

All the students – there were 78 altogether and seven of those were Coeur employees – took one of three 40-hour MSHA safety/first aid classes. Of those 78, 11 also took the six-week construction class and another 24 took the nipper class.

The 11 construction students graduated from their class in December. They learned everything from reading blueprints to rigging and welding, including nearly 10 days studying concrete and foundations. The classes were held at UAS’ Technical Education Center in downtown Juneau.

But the three-week nipper class was held either outside the Maggie Kathleen mine in Thane, a

few miles south of Juneau, or up to 780 feet into the mine, 300 feet underground, Steffy said.

The idea for using the Maggie Kathleen to train didn’t come about until the training planning group encountered Jerry Harmon, a miner for 32 years who’s now a surface foreman at Kensington on the Lynn Canal side. He leases the Maggie Kathleen and runs summer tours there.

Harmon was the lead instructor for the nipper class and taught some MSHA classes. He’s lived in Alaska for as long as he’s been a miner, but during that time he’s worked in mines in Brazil, Africa, the British West Indies, Canada and Alaska.

Steffy said the nipper class encountered nearly everything they would as a miner, except blasting, because the Maggie Kathleen is too close to Juneau.

“There was no simulation to this at all,” he said. “It was the real thing. It’s nothing like Greens Creek or Kensington,” he added, but it was enough to tell “who was going to make it, who was going to be a miner.

“We were actually doing the work,” Steffy said. “We put in bolts. We built walkways and scaffolding. We timbered up the entrance to the mine. We put in doors and a gate, 20-feet high and 16-feet wide, for security. We laid the rail and the track.”

¹ But that wasn’t always the case. The U.S. Department of Labor’s MSHA, in its “A Pictorial Walk Through the 20th Century: Honoring the U.S. Miner,” says that nippers in the coal mines in the 1800s and early 1900s were the youngest of boys, usually ages 8 to 13, who worked underground and opened heavy doors for approaching coal cars, then quickly closed the doors after the cars went through. The nippers sat for hours in the dark in between cars with their carbide cap lamp as their only light.



An unidentified drill operator (above) runs a diamond drill underground at the Kensington mine north of Juneau. Drills like this one have a diamond tip that'll drill 1,000 feet into the rock to collect core samples for geologists to analyze.

Sometimes it'd be two students underground at a time with an instructor; other times it'd be five or six, he said. The others would either be working outside the mine getting equipment working or in a nearby classroom, converted from a gift shop.

Harmon said that of the 24 students who started the nipper class, three dropped out for medical reasons and 21 graduated in February. Steffy said that's a tremendous outcome, considering that with nipper training, you usually start with 20 and lose half.

So far, Kensington has hired eight of the nipper graduates and one instructor from the mine training, all for full-time jobs. Three others were recently offered temporary jobs in the mine's geology department. Harmon said another four to six have accepted jobs at other companies – a Pogo mine contractor, near Delta, and a Canadian company working in Fairbanks – and he bets Kensington will eventually hire the rest.

"Those 21 guys are just absolutely excellent," said Harmon, who has been supervising the eight at Kensington. "They'll be months ahead of everyone else."

"It's amazing. You'd think these guys have been here forever," he said. "They're just well trained. They were well-prepared before they got here."

"When you talk to them [the students], they're the happiest bunch of people you'll ever see. They cheer the whole place up," Harmon said about Kensington. "They're the 'new miner.'"

"It's [probably] the first time they've been trained before the job started. They're confident. They went into the workplace without stumbling along. One guy is just fascinated that he's making the money he's making and he's doing well."

"Now they'll be able to kick it up a notch," and work up the ladder as a miner. "They know that, and they say that over and over again. They're stepping up in their life cycle. They have a good job, a good-paying job and they're wanted and they're accepted. There's

no bickering. They just come out here and go to work.”

Harmon said a top miner at Kensington makes \$28 to \$29 an hour; people starting out make \$15 to \$16 an hour, plus overtime and medical insurance. The mine is running 24 hours a day, every day, so people at the mine work 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, with some variation of two weeks on and one week off.

Including overtime, people working in Alaska’s mining industry² made an average \$72,176 in 2005, according to data from unemployment insurance quarterly contribution reports.

The Kensington mine has 230 workers now (65 of them are Coeur employees) and will employ 230 to 300 when it’s in production, Coeur officials said.

Steffy said the high caliber of the 78 students in the MSHA, construction and nipper classes was because the Department of Labor and Tlingit and Haida did such a thorough job pre-screening the students, to ensure the training was a good route for them and they had a strong commitment to do well in the field. The students’ ages ranged from 18 to 60-plus, Harmon said.

Steffy said he met with all the students and discussed their backgrounds.

“Virtually all of them brought substantial skill sets,” to the program, he said, adding the caveat that the construction class students might have had fewer skills, but only because they tended to be younger.

Regardless, Steffy said that if Kensington’s U.S. Forest Service permit hadn’t hit a snag – the permit process was held up when the permit was contested – he thinks the mine would have hired nearly everyone in the program, particularly if the construction of the mine’s docks, mill and underground expansion were in full force.

“There’s no question that those people had job skills that would be needed in those jobs,” he said.

² This includes everyone employed in the mining industry – miners as well as managers, secretaries, cooks and others.

UAS provided instructors, classroom space and, with the Department of Labor and Coeur, subsidized much of the training costs. Steffy said Coeur supplied “an unbelievable amount” of equipment and supplies – even flying equipment in by helicopter the day after they requested it – plus their employees’ time in planning and as instructors.

All the planning team members did heavy recruiting, particularly the Berners Bay Consortium, Tlingit and Haida and the Department of Labor. Burke said that for students with low incomes, Tlingit and Haida and the Department of Labor bought raingear and boots – anything they needed for the training – and paid hotel, food and travel costs for out-of-towners.

Tuition for the nipper and construction classes was roughly \$900 and the MSHA class was free. Tlingit and Haida, the Department of Labor, Coeur, Klukwan and Kake Tribal provided scholarships to those who couldn’t afford the tuition, Burke said.

The UAS’ George said, “They really went out of their way on a daily basis to make sure the success rate was high.”

Asked why he thinks the training planning group had such exceptional results, Steffy pointed to several things.

The proximity of the people in the group was a big thing, plus the fact that they could make decisions for their agencies. Steffy said that meant they could accomplish things fast. He could fly to Juneau and meet with various people in the group – or have the whole group meet – relatively easily.

“The proximity made the communication super simple,” he said. “It was, ‘Bang! It’s done.’ Otherwise, it’s the email game and telephone messages. You’re sitting here, and next week, you’re still waiting to talk to everyone.” He said it was also good that the group was made up of local people – people tapped into the community where the training is taking place, so they know about available resources and have contacts.

It's important, too, to work closely with the mine employer, Steffy said. Before Coeur – its parent company is based in Idaho – had human relations people living in Juneau, the company flew their staff up from Idaho eight or 10 times to meet with the training planning group, he said.

Steffy also said it was good that the planning group was made up of people from such diverse entities, governmental and private. That way a whole range of interests were represented and ideas came from people with different backgrounds.

"Very seldom do I get to work that way," he said.

Timing is crucial, as Steffy, Burke and Harmon mentioned separately what appears to be a cardinal rule with work force training: you only train people when there are immediate job openings. That makes it a delicate balancing act. You have to plan in advance for the training at one pace – before the jobs are open and sometimes when the mining project faces delays – and then really gun it as those job openings get closer.

Steffy said from last spring to November, parts of the planning group met roughly once a week and the group met about once a month. Then toward the end of November – six weeks or so before the nipper training took place – the group "rolled it into high gear."

"We met with two or three elements of the group at least once a day, often twice a day," he said. "That's what's so wonderful."

Later, Steffy said, "If we would have waited until [Kensington] got their permit back," to start getting the training together, "then we would have been too far behind the power curve to catch up."

What comes next? In Juneau, the group is planning a nipper class for October, plus MSHA classes before that, Steffy said.

Nome is the spot for the next big training push, he said. The Department of Labor is surveying the Nome work force now to pin down what type of training is needed. Nome's Rock Creek mine is a surface gold mine, so training for that is a lot simpler, Steffy said.

After that, it might be on to Pebble, if that project materializes, and oil and gas, he said.

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Martin "Sonny" Goenett, who grew up in Juneau, is one of the nipper class students that Kensington hired. The 45-year-old father of four has worked as a Bering Sea crabber for four years and maintenance man for 12. He said the mine training and his new job have had big impact on him.

"It's changed my life for the better," he said. "Now I have something to look forward to. I want to buy my own house and save for my kids for their education. This is it. This is the job for me."

For more information about mine training programs in the state, contact Mary Rodman-Lopez, an employment service manager, at (907) 465-5546 or Danny Lakip, a community development specialist, at (907) 465-5547. Both are in the Juneau Job Center. They can also be reached through the job center's toll-free number, (888) 465-5872, or via email: Mary_Rodman-Lopez@labor.state.ak.us and Danny_Lakip@labor.state.ak.us.