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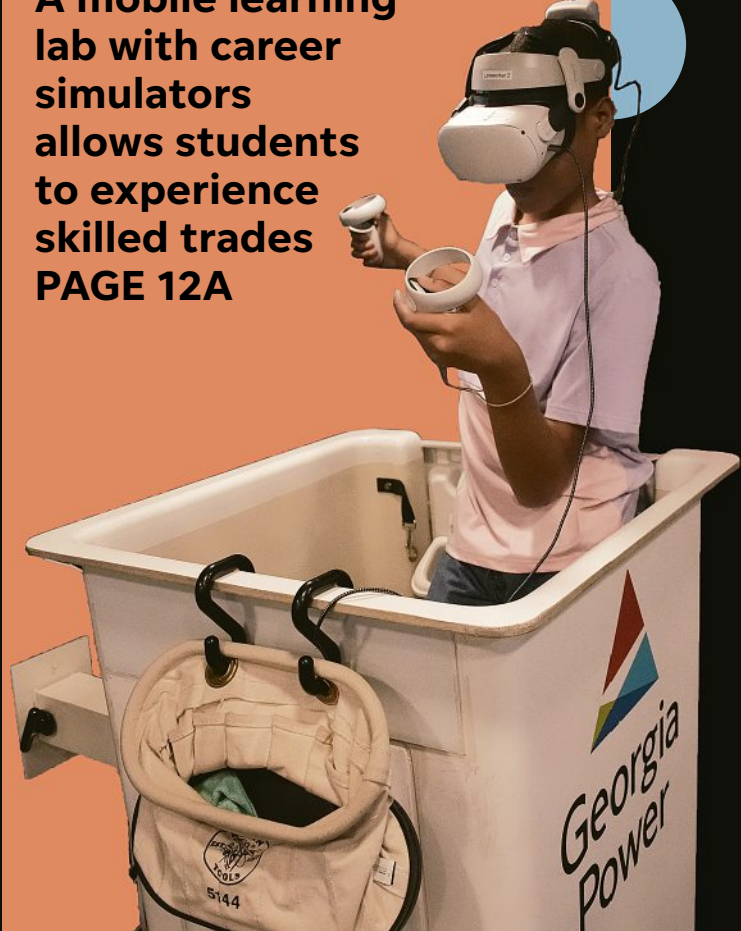






A mobile learning lab with career simulators allows students to experience skilled trades

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If it's local you want, we've got it.

Our Sunday refresh offers more local news and sports, as well as "Weekend Exclusive" content to help you navigate your lives. So enjoy your Sunday reading filled with stories that will inspire, educate, inform and entertain you. **FOR THE LATEST LOCAL NEWS >>**





A LOOK BACK

Remembering Andrew

Hurricane Andrew left a trail of devastation when it roared ashore on Aug. 24, 1992, killing dozens of people, destroying or damaging hundreds of thousands of homes and causing billions of dollars in damage. These front pages provide a snapshot of how newspapers covered the tragedy 34 years ago this month.

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SPORTS

28 for 2028

Jacksonville area's top juniors are turning heads on recruiting scene.

PAGE 1B

WHAT WE DO

BEHIND THE SCENES

Lab shows kids anti-AI careers

Josiah Smith, 17, tries his luck at driving an articulated dump truck on a simulator at Orange Park High School to learn skilled trades as opposed to so much relying on AI these days. DOUG ENGLE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION



Beth Reese Cravey
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

“As AI reshapes the workforce ...”
That’s the phrase that got our attention when a local public relations firm pitched us a story about WareWorks Skilled Trades Institute helping Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Florida members.
But the way WareWorks is helping youth had nothing directly to do with artificial intelligence. The Jacksonville nonprofit is introducing them to anti-AI careers “that will continue to rely on human skill, craftsmanship and hands-on expertise,” according to the PR firm.
In an interactive mobile learning lab, they got to test out high-demand skilled trades, such as truck driving, welding, crane operation, aviation and electrical jobs.
AI is also reshaping journalism, as management and staff determine how best to use it – and how much to use it – without negatively impacting humans and their jobs. AI is not going away so we have to figure it out.
Can AI do my job? Maybe, at a superficial level. Can AI do my job well, with the understanding of people and their motivations that is required? No.
But it can compile and analyze data, transcribe interviews, summarize reports and track changes, among other things.
So here’s to youth finding their futures in skilled trades. And to journalists finding their way in the modern AI universe.
Beth Reese Cravey has been a reporter for The Florida Times-Union for 45 years, currently specializing in non-profits and health. She can be reached at bcravey@jacksonville.com.



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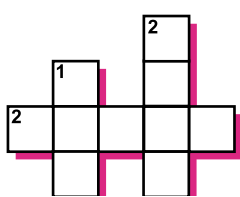
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Norman Armstrong, 16, wears a virtual reality head set to experience work as a lineman.

HANDS-ON CAREERS

Youth explore skilled trades that remain in high demand

Beth Reese Cravey Jacksonville Florida Times-Union | USA TODAY NETWORK

As artificial intelligence modernizes the workplace, two Jacksonville nonprofits are working together to introduce youth to old-school careers, albeit with a high-tech twist. • At a recent Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Florida event at Orange Park High School, WareWorks Skilled Trades Institute of Jacksonville brought a mobile learning lab with up to 12 interactive career simulations. Via simulators and virtual reality, youth could test out truck driving, welding, aviation, crane operation, agricultural drone technology and lineman jobs, which rely on human skills and craftsmanship. • Such jobs remain necessary to the economy, are in high demand and focus on hands-on expertise. They don't necessarily rely on AI, but, in some cases, AI has improved how they function.



Coach Antrinell Lamar, left, helps Denis Cato operate an articulated dump truck simulator at Orange Park High School on July 13. WareWorks Skilled Trades Institute of Jacksonville brought multiple career simulators to the school's Boys & Girls Club. PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

“Through hands-on exposure, students can discover careers that match their interests and abilities and learn how to begin preparing for them,” WareWorks CEO Karen Bowling said. “AI is making many trades safer and more efficient, but it is also changing the skills employers need. Workforce development must evolve with those changes while continuing to emphasize the human expertise, craftsmanship and hands-on problem-solving that technology cannot easily replace.”

Paul Martinez, CEO of the area Boys & Girls Club, agreed.

“We see AI as an opportunity to close opportunity gaps, not widen them,” he said. “By introducing young people to artificial intelligence in a safe and responsible way, we’re preparing them for careers that may not even exist today. Workforce readiness is no longer just about reading, writing and math, it’s about digital literacy, critical thinking and learning how to work alongside technology.”

Trying out careers via simulators, virtual reality

At the WareWorks event at the Orange Park High club, member Nicholas Mitchell took the wheel of a big rig, on a big rig simulator.

“I’ve been inspired by trucking since I was little. I always wanted to do truck driving, mainly big trucks,” he said.

Fellow club member Jeremiah Davis tried his hand at welding, virtual reality welding.

“I come from a family of welders,” he said, adding that he wants to be a travel welder, which would allow him to see the world.

Nicholas, Jeremiah and other members of the school’s Boys & Girls Club also heard all about the financial benefits of such vocational careers.

“People with skilled trades going directly from high school are making twice the money of a four-year degree person,” WareWorks Coach Antrinell Lamar told them. “Proven fact.”

Also, they don’t enter the workplace with college student debt, he said.

Northeast Florida’s Boys & Girls Clubs provide summer camps and after-school and leadership development programs for about 5,500 young people daily in Alachua, Clay, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns counties. Five of the club sites, including Orange Park High, were among the seven stops on the institute’s Try-A-Trade summer tour.

The visits were part of the area clubs’ burgeoning partnership with WareWorks, according to Martinez. Three of the clubs’ seven teen centers – at Orange Park High and in Jacksonville at Ed White High and in Springfield – will soon have WareWorks programs and skilled trades labs “as part of their Boys & Girls Clubs experience,” he said.



Samir Brown McDonald, 15, right, builds an engine using virtual reality technology.

ON THE COVER: DESIGN BY RACHEL BRAMMER/ USA TODAY NETWORK; PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/ FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

Federal grant boosts job training for youth

Money will help with careers in construction, marine industries

Beth Reese Cravey
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

AMikids Jacksonville has received a \$1.5 million federal grant to help young people in Duval County land career opportunities in the construction and marine industries.

Awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration, the grant establishes the AMikids Jacksonville YouthBuild 2026 Program. Beginning in November, the workforce development initiative will provide 66 youth ages 16 to 24 with education, hands-on workforce training, leadership development and career programs in those two high-demand trades.

The grant agreement calls for the required 25% match to be raised throughout the 40-month grant period, which runs from July 1, 2026, through Oct. 31, 2029.

“This investment allows us to partner with local agencies, educational institutions and businesses to help young adults further their education, develop valuable trade skills, and prepare for meaningful, long-term careers,” Stephanie O’Brien-Gadd, executive director of AMikids Jacksonville, said. “Together, we’re creating pathways that lead to lasting success for participants while strengthening our local workforce.”

AMikids is a national nonprofit that combines treatment, education, workforce development and behavioral and skills training for young people, as an alternative to juvenile detention. Founded in 1969 in Fort Lauderdale, the organization has served about 172,000 youth to date and through nearly 44 programs across six states.

The local YouthBuild program will have two specialized training pathways:

- Construction – Participants will earn the National Center for Construction Education and Research core credential and gain experience in residential and affordable housing construction and renovation projects.

- Construction Plus Marine Technician – Participants will complete a Florida Department of Education Registered Pre-Apprenticeship. The program prepares them for careers in marine repair, marine electrical systems, propulsion systems, hydraulics, diagnostics, shipbuilding and other marine service occupations.

Also, young people in the AMikids Jacksonville YouthBuild program will receive leadership development, career readiness instruction, work-based learning opportunities, case management, career coaching and connections to employers, apprenticeships and postsecondary education.

“This grant represents an important investment in our community’s future,” O’Brien-Gadd said. “We’re empowering the next generation with the skills, confidence and opportunities they need to succeed while helping meet the workforce needs of Northeast Florida.”

Program partners are Operation Lifeline, CareerSource Northeast Florida, Jacksonville Job Corps/Covenant Learning, Florida State College at Jacksonville, the Mason Contractors Association of America, Florida Masonry Association, Vallenguard Construction, Huckins Yacht, Lakeshore Marine Center and Sea School.

Erick Saks is founder and executive director of Operation Lifeline, a nonprofit that offers home ownership and rehabilitation, supportive housing and workforce and skills training programs for veterans.

“We know careers in the skilled trades can provide financial stability, purpose and a path to success,” he said. “Through this partnership, participants will gain industry-recognized credentials, hands-on construction skills and valuable experience serving their community. By combining training with real-world experience, we’re helping young people build the skills and confidence they need to achieve their goals while strengthening our local workforce.”

For more information, go to amikids.org/location/amikids-jacksonville or call (904) 223-1121.

Beth Reese Cravey has been a reporter for The Florida Times-Union for 45 years, currently specializing in nonprofits and health. She can be reached at bcravey@jacksonville.com.



AMikids Jacksonville, where troubled Duval County youth receive treatment, education workforce development, has received a \$1.5 million federal grant to help them learn the construction and marine trades. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY AMIKIDS JACKSONVILLE



The recent mobile learning lab tour served as a pilot program, allowing students to experience a variety of skilled trades while helping us better understand which career pathways generated the greatest interest. Those insights are now helping guide the programming, curriculum and simulation equipment that will be installed at each location.

“These centers will continue providing the high-quality Boys & Girls Clubs programming our members know, while expanding opportunities through dedicated skilled trades labs where teens can explore different careers, discover what interests them and learn what education or training they will need to enter those fields after graduation,” Martinez said. “Having the mobile lab visit our clubs was a natural extension of that partnership and an exciting way to introduce students to what will be possible at these locations.”

The “hands-on” nature of the mobile learning lab is key, he said.

“Young people cannot pursue careers they have never had the opportunity to see or experience,” Martinez said. “Watching a student try welding, crane operation or another trade for the first time and suddenly realize, ‘I could do this,’ is incredibly meaningful.”

“Our role is to help young people recognize their potential and understand that there are many different paths to a successful future,” he added. “Experiences like this can plant a seed that influences the decisions they make throughout high school and beyond.”

The history behind WareWorks

WareWorks was founded in December 2025 as a workforce development organization serving Northeast Florida.

The nonprofit supports existing workforce efforts and develops programs to expand career pathways in skilled trades.

Founder Chris Ware built The Ware Group from a single HVAC supply operation into a regional company with more than 40 locations, Bowling, former chief administrative officer for Mayor Donna Deegan, said.

“Across Florida and the nation, employers continue to report shortages in many skilled trades, making career awareness and workforce development increasingly important for students and local industries,” she said. “Chris Ware ... saw firsthand how difficult it was for contractors and other employers to find enough technically trained workers.”

He also recognized that many people, particularly young people, were unaware of the rewarding, high-demand careers available in the skilled trades or didn’t know how to enter them, she said.

Ware established WareWorks to “bring partners and resources together, help people understand the opportunities available and create clearer pathways from career exploration to training



Audrey Redd, center, reacts as she crashes her articulated dump truck in a simulator at Orange Park High School on July 13. “Truck driving is not for me,” Redd said.

PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

and employment,” Bowling said. “The goal is to make the process of entering a skilled trade easier to understand and navigate.”

Sponsored by TECO Energy, this summer’s tour was WareWorks’ first mobile skilled trades lab pilot. The lab itself was borrowed from the Georgia affiliate of Be Pro Be Proud, a nationwide workforce development initiative. Now the Jacksonville nonprofit is working to partner with Be Pro Be Proud to acquire its own mobile skills lab, potentially this fall.

The lab would initially serve high school students throughout Northeast Florida and later expand to other parts of the state, Bowling said.

During this summer’s tour, about 700 young people learned about skilled trades.

“It is at the heart of why WareWorks exists. There are excellent career opportunities in the skilled trades, but too many students graduate without ever being introduced to them,” Bowling said. “When we see a student discover a talent or interest they did not know they had, we see a future beginning to take shape.”

In addition to the Boys & Clubs, WareWorks has youth-based partnerships with the University of North Florida, the Northeast Florida Builders Association, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, SkillUSA and other employers, training providers and community organizations.

See **LEARNING LAB**, Page 14A

“Watching a student try welding, crane operation or another trade for the first time and suddenly realize, ‘I could do this,’ is incredibly meaningful.”

Paul Martinez
CEO of the area Boys & Girls Club



Kelin Wortham, a truck driver since 1999, helps Brianna Turner in the semi-truck driving simulator. The Be Pro Be Proud Mobile Learning Lab featured more than a dozen immersive simulations.



Angelina Seda drives a truck in a simulator as about 80 youth from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Florida take part in the Jax-based WareWorks Skilled Trades Institute tour, an interactive mobile learning lab to youth organizations at Orange Park High School on July 13. PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

Learning lab

Continued from Page 13A

A mission and future for young people

“This work is not simply about filling workforce shortages. It is about helping young people see that they have options and connecting them with a realistic pathway to a stable, rewarding career. If we can help a young person move from ‘I have never thought about that’ to ‘I can see myself doing this,’ then we have begun to accomplish our mission,” Bowling said.

WareWorks recently launched an online resource to help students, as early as ninth grade, explore not only skilled trade options but employment. The Career Pathway Platform features an assessment to identify trades that match students’ interests and abilities, as well as salary ranges and required education, training or certifications for particular fields. The platform is at wareworksfl.com.

Another new WareWorks launch is Trade Up, a community initiative developed with News4JAX to raise awareness of area skilled trades careers. Weekly stories will spotlight local



Clay County Superintendent of Schools David Broskie watches and comments as Nicholas Mitchell drives a simulated truck at the WareWorks Skilled Trades Institute's interactive mobile learning lab.

professionals, students, employers and workforce programs, Bowling said.

For more information about WareWorks, go to wareworksfl.com.

Beth Reese Cravey has been a reporter for The Florida Times-Union for 45 years, currently specializing in non-profits and health. She can be reached at bcravey@jacksonville.com.

Puerto Rico water crisis could impact tourism

Josh Rivera
USA TODAY

The Island of Enchantment is struggling. A combination of severe drought, low reservoir levels, a major aqueduct rupture and aging infrastructure has left Puerto Ricans facing a water crisis.

Beginning Aug. 7, the local government imposed a rationing program that shut off water service in the capital, San Juan, and surrounding neighborhoods for 48-hour intervals, according to Puerto Rico’s Aqueduct and Sewer Authority.

However, Puerto Rico remains open to visitors, and tourism is largely insulated from the island’s water crisis. Even visitors to San Juan, a major destination, might not feel the effects.

“The crisis isn’t for [the tourists]; the crisis is for the people,” said Arturo Massol Deyá, the director of community organization Casa Pueblo.

“Part of the water crisis isn’t only a meteorological drought,” said Emilio Pantojas, a senior researcher at the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of Puerto Rico. “It’s not just a lack of rain; there’s also a problem with the management of the aqueduct system, the water distribution system, and water collection and distribution. ... If you’re in a large resort, if you’re staying with a chain, the effect on you is marginal.”

Hotels, restaurants and casinos are trying to maintain normal operations.

Puerto Rico Hotel and Tourism Association President and CEO Clarisa Jiménez told local media that hotels have been “working with employees, guests and implementing conservation efforts,” but the uncertainty is difficult. Sonia Navarro, president of the Puerto Rico Restaurants Association, has pushed for greater collaboration with local government to ensure restaurants can operate with a regular water supply.

Pantojas said there is a lot of uncertainty for tourists: “There are shortages of water in different areas that you need to know. There are problems with restaurants and other services. So make



A sign reading “We demand water” is displayed in the window of a restaurant in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Aug. 11. RICARDO ARDUENGO/REUTERS

sure that where you’re going is not under rationing.”

Tourism leaders are warning that a prolonged crisis could damage Puerto Rico’s reputation. Hotels are already reporting higher operating costs, while short-term rentals are seeing more cancellations, according to the newspaper El Nuevo Día.

“Rationing is spreading east and west, toward the northeast and northwest,” Pantojas said. “And those are areas with a lot of tourism activity.”

Discover Puerto Rico, the island’s official destination marketing organization, launched a “Keep the Island Singing” campaign Aug. 20 to encourage visitors to reduce water consumption.

Once tourists are on the island, they should take short showers instead of baths, turn off the tap while brushing teeth and reuse towels when practical, among other basic measures.

“Water misused by tourists is water that the people – the public – do not receive,” Massol Deyá said. “It shouldn’t be tourism of alienation, which is practiced a lot. Tourists come here, disconnect themselves, go off into one little corner and think that’s the country.”

“The call is to get to know the country in addition to enjoying it,” he added. “And that includes enjoying its natural attributes and recognizing systemic problems that are worsening with climate change.”

Contributing: Christopher Cann, USA TODAY

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