Climbing Ever Higher

When James "JT" Jacobs graduated from Southside Virginia Community College's Power Line Worker Training Program, his ascent had just begun. His most recent step up the career ladder has taken him to Palmyra, Virginia where he now serves as an instructor for the Virginia Maryland Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC). In this capacity, he provides professional development services for line workers across the region.

JT says, "Being an instructor at VMDAEC has provided me the opportunity of providing safety and training services to member Cooperatives in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Tennessee. It has allowed me to gain experience in a whole new realm of the power delivery industry."

He discovered his affinity for power line work after a circuitous journey. JT remembers, "When I was growing up my career aspirations were always outside the realm of everyday jobs. I remember periods of my adolescence wanting to be a professional athlete, a fighter jet pilot, even a monster truck driver."

Like many young people of his generation, however, he heard the strong cultural message that building a successful career required a four-year degree. After high school graduation, he began that traditional journey. He tried several majors, including biology and business management. He sampled programs at two different schools. Nothing felt like a good fit.

JT reports that transferring and frequent changes of major left him with a lot of college credits but nothing coalesced. He began to lose interest in school. "After five years of college education, I had no degree to show for it. Life was happening around me, and college was no longer a priority in my life."

He left the halls of academia and went to work. At first, things seemed rosy, but opportunities for advancement were limited. He says, "Feelings of regret and failure crossed my mind quite often for not finishing my education, and I soon was met with the harsh reality of a glass ceiling."

JT began researching other opportunities. He explains, "I started exploring trade professions. I had never realized or been made aware of the vast amount of career opportunities outside of a college education. In my research I was surprised at the salary of most trade jobs. An article in a cooperative living magazine, advertising a new power-line worker training school at SVCC, caught my attention."

SVCC launched Virginia's first in-state training program for power line workers in 2016. Prior to its establishment, students who wanted such training had to travel out of state where tuition and housing expenses were often prohibitive.

JT enrolled in SVCC's program in Blackstone. He recalls, "My favorite part of this program was learning to climb and work from elevated heights. Some lineman may call me crazy, but I believe there is no greater feeling in the world then being at the top of a utility pole. I still remember the exhilaration of climbing my first pole, I had finally found my niche!"

One month after graduation, JT accepted a lineman apprenticeship position in Manassas, Virginia, and later he moved to the Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative. During his tenure there he reports, "I competed in two Lineman Rodeo's. A Lineman's Rodeo is a huge event held once a year in which lineman from different companies compete in skills competitions such as climbing. I placed second in one of the main events, the Hurt-man Rescue Event."

JT also had an opportunity to serve others in a unique way. "I was lucky enough to be a part of a team composed of lineman from cooperatives in Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware that went to Bolivia to bring electricity to rural communities that were less fortunate. Being exposed to the level of poverty in the communities humbled the hearts of us all. It leaves quite an impression on an American to witness a grown man cry when a light bulb turns on in his home for the first time in his life."

After that trip, JT continued working with diligence. "I've always had big dreams and have wanted to climb the ladder," he reports. He recalls a quote attributed to Arnold Schwarzenegger, "You can't climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pockets."

When JT decided to apply for the job of instructor with VMDAEC, he considered it a long shot. "I've never let the impossible hinder my drive. I took a shot and applied." He was accepted for the position. His future plans include learning as much as possible, being the best he can be, and to keep pursuing excellence in whatever comes next.

To others who may be considering power line work, JT notes that the job requires mental and physical strength. Power line workers must learn to overcome fear, whether it be a fear of heights, a fear of electricity, or a fear of the unknown. They must also learn to trust their co-workers, let go of egotistic pride, and learn to enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done and safely done. In summarizing his own journey, he says, "What surprised me the most about line work was how much I enjoyed it. The challenging tasks are like none other."

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