Welding school offers night shift to fit busy schedules

KVAL 13 - Eugene, Oregon

by Chris Parker for KVAL.com

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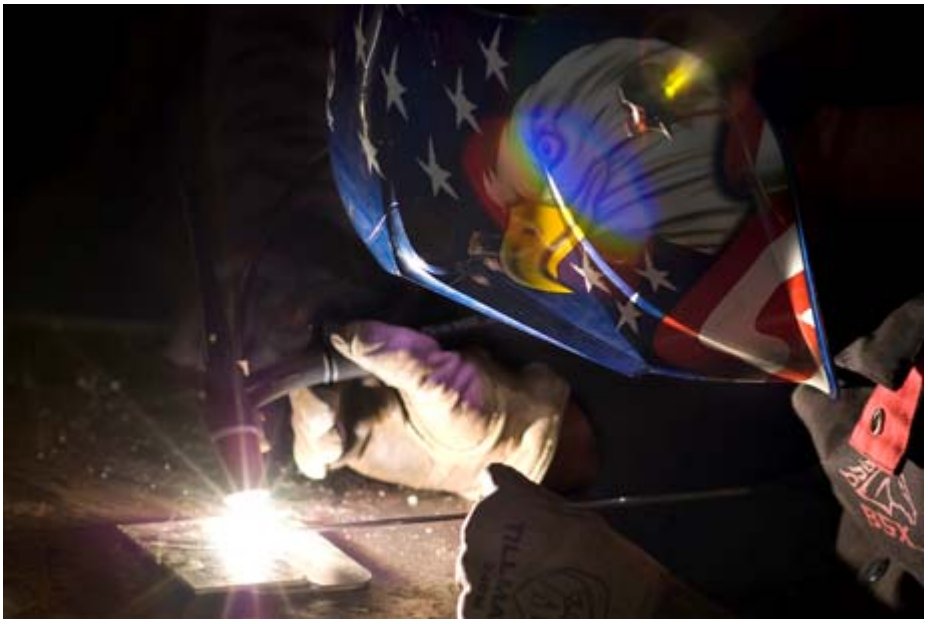
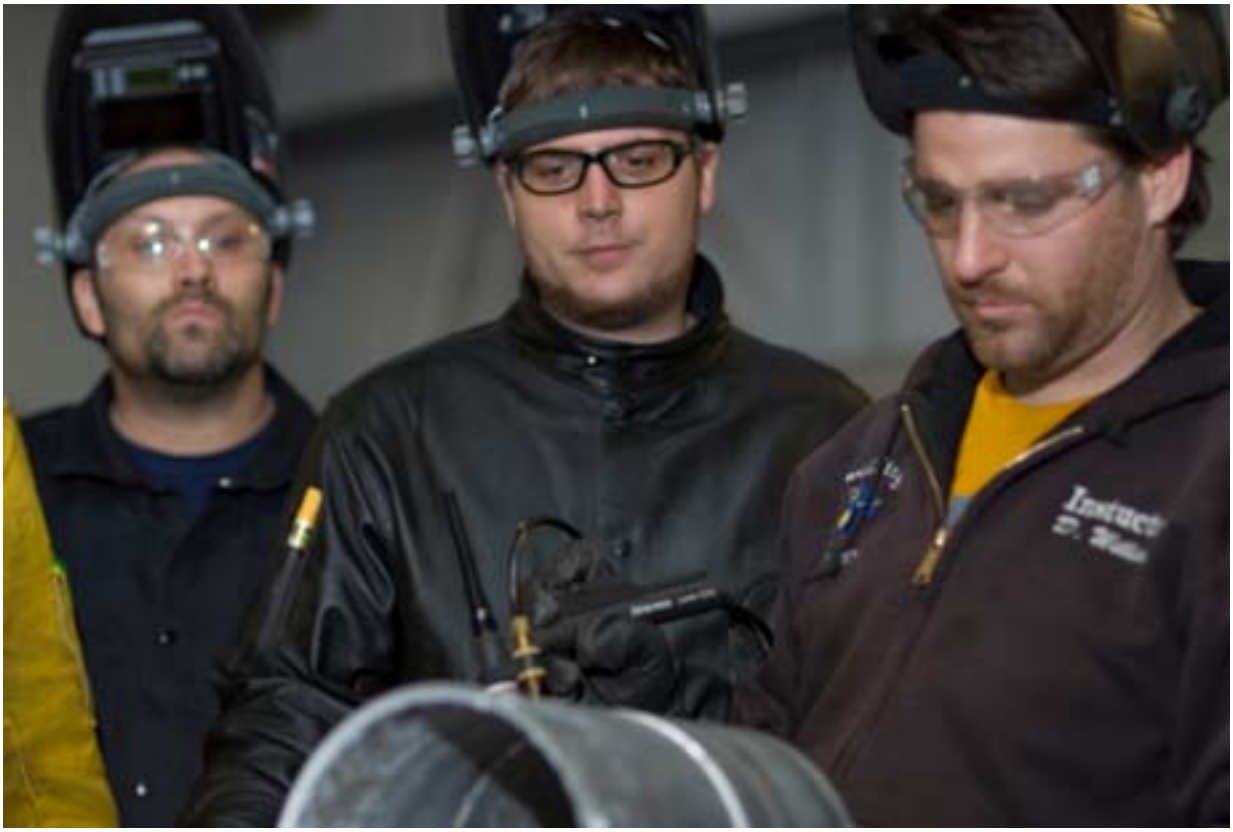
OREGON CITY, Ore. -- The sun isn't necessary for students welding at midnight: the blinding electric arcs provide enough light at **Clackamas Community College** metal shop.



Brandon Knox's helmet exemplifies the identity welders place in their helmets, usually the one piece of gear they are required to provide themselves at job sites.

John Phelps and David Williams instruct welding classes during the graveyard shift, from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m., to accommodate an enrollment demand that has surged over the last year. According to Phelps, enrollment increased 60 percent since last fall term, making it difficult for students to take welding classes during normal hours.



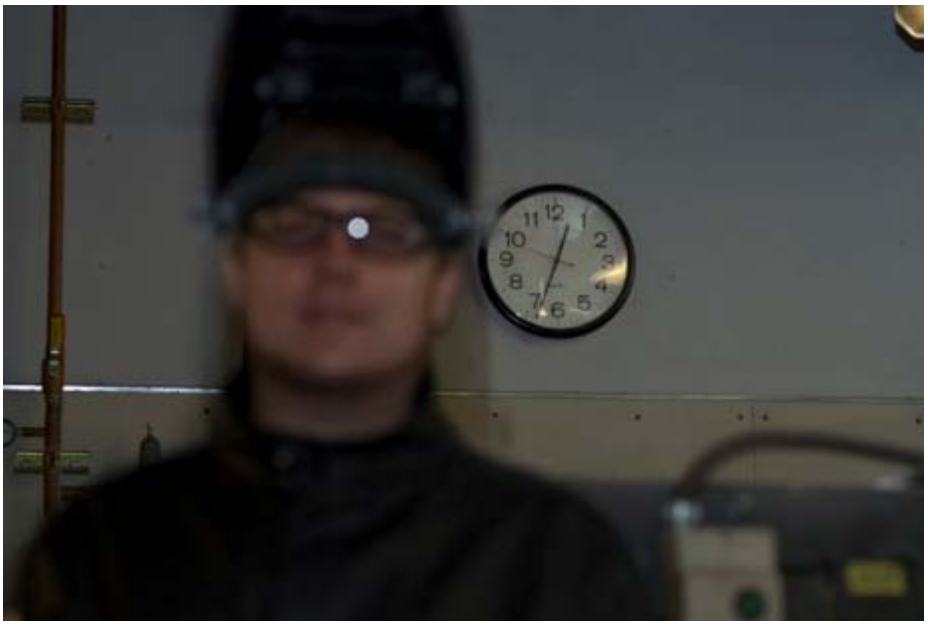
Dave Williams, right, instructs Justin Cleveland, on the left, and Wayne Rush, in the middle, to weld aluminum tubing using small “tack” welds to hold the pieces together for handling.

“Because the enrollment shot up so high, there was no other way to accommodate these needs," Phelps said. "We already offer classes seven days a week. The only other time slot we didn’t offer was this late at night, and so we wanted to give it a try."

At first the graveyard classes were only held two nights a week, but since being offered spring term of 2009, more students have become interested in the late night class. Now, the graveyard class is offered Monday through Thursday.

Many choose the graveyard shift because of responsibilities during the day, such as family care, work, or seeking employment.

“Everybody has different specific reasons why the graveyard shift works best for them," said Wayne Rush, a former production manager and safety coordinator. "For me it’s just so I can keep my days open to maybe help family out while I am laid-off, or to continue to search for work.”



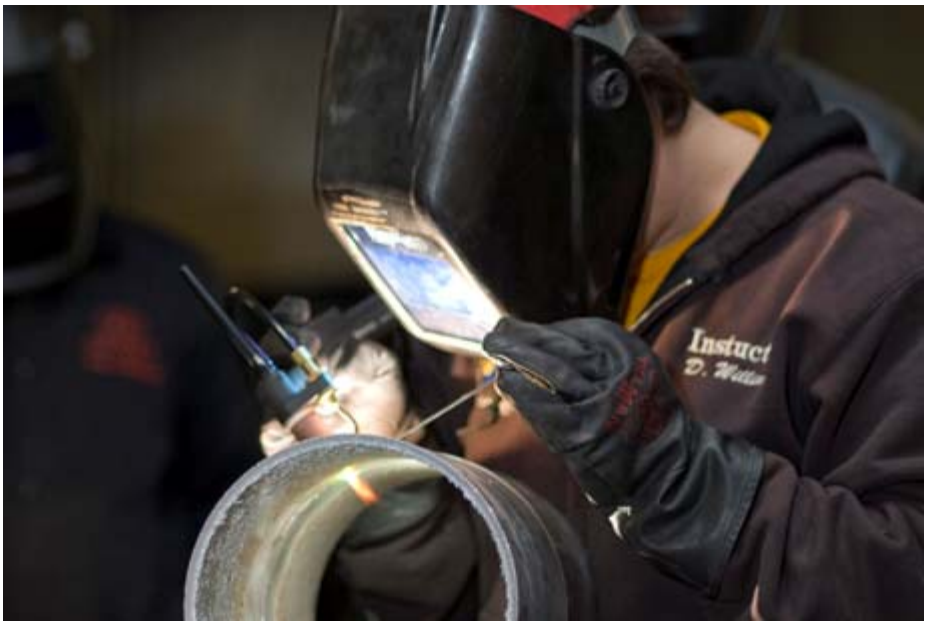
When class ends at 2 a.m., Wayne Rush travels over an hour home to Mount Hood.

In the four-hour period, the students -- many unemployed because of the recession -- seek to increase their skill and pass certification tests to prepare themselves for a competitive job market. Employers find certifications on a resume important, especially for work involving bridges and other projects that require high standards. These certifications test the ability to weld in a variety of positions that include vertically, horizontally, and inverted.

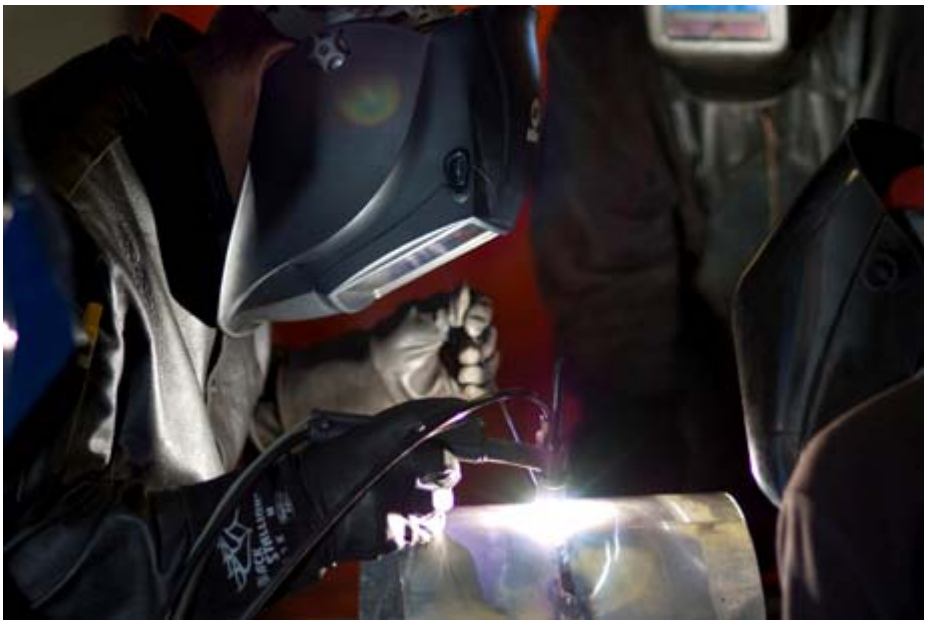
A strong bond exists between the students and instructors at the graveyard classes, creating a camaraderie that pushes the students through the difficult certification process.

Latrell Woods, an unemployed full-time student, says that the instructors have helped him move forward in welding, after he failed his certification last term.

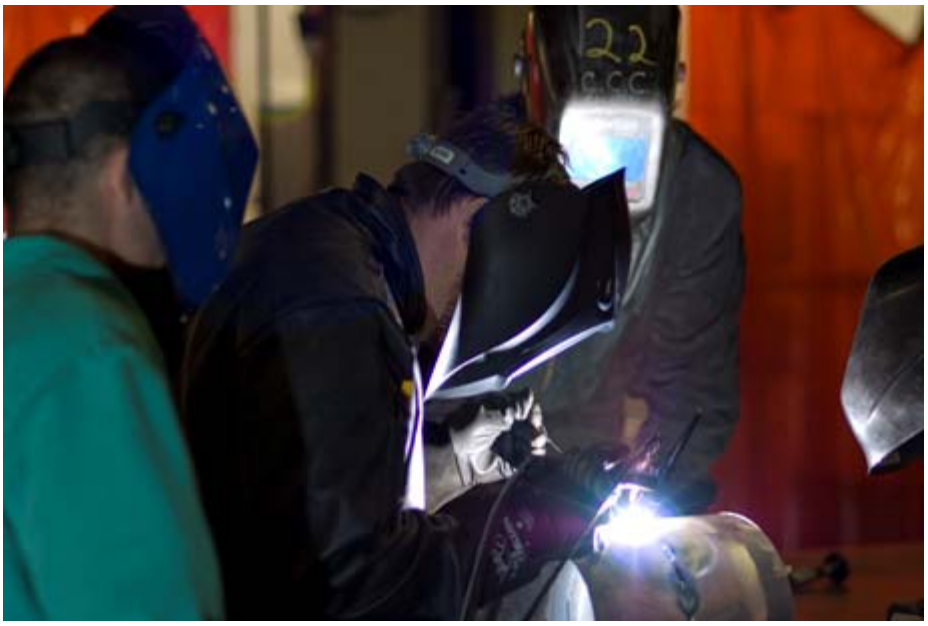
“I have been rushing, rushing, rushing, and pushing my self, and pushing myself, so I can get this certification done. And they have been right their behind me,” said Woods.



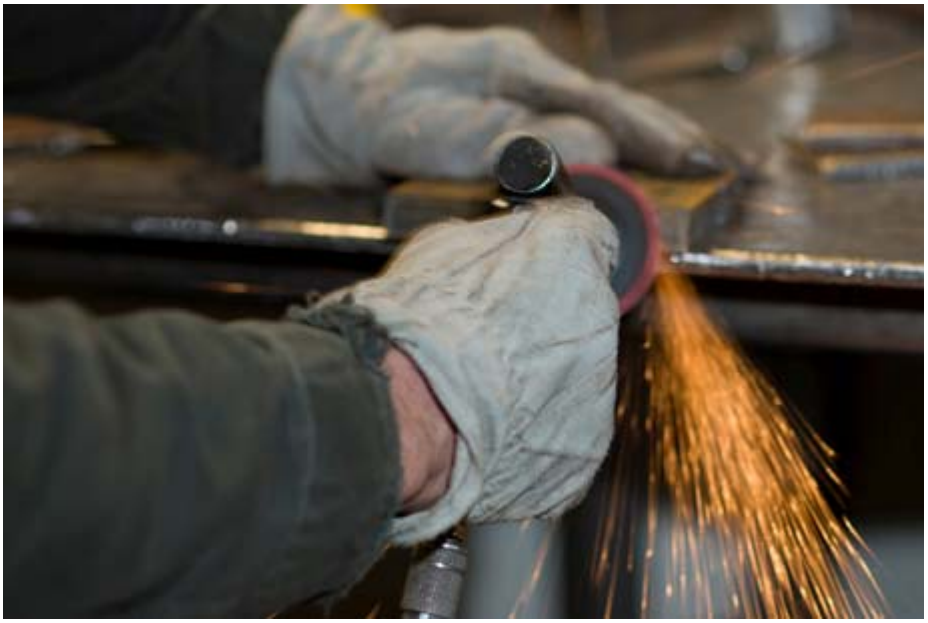
Dave Williams uses tungsten to fuse the aluminum pieces together. Aluminum is a light metal and requires the delicate welding precision of gas tungsten arc welding.



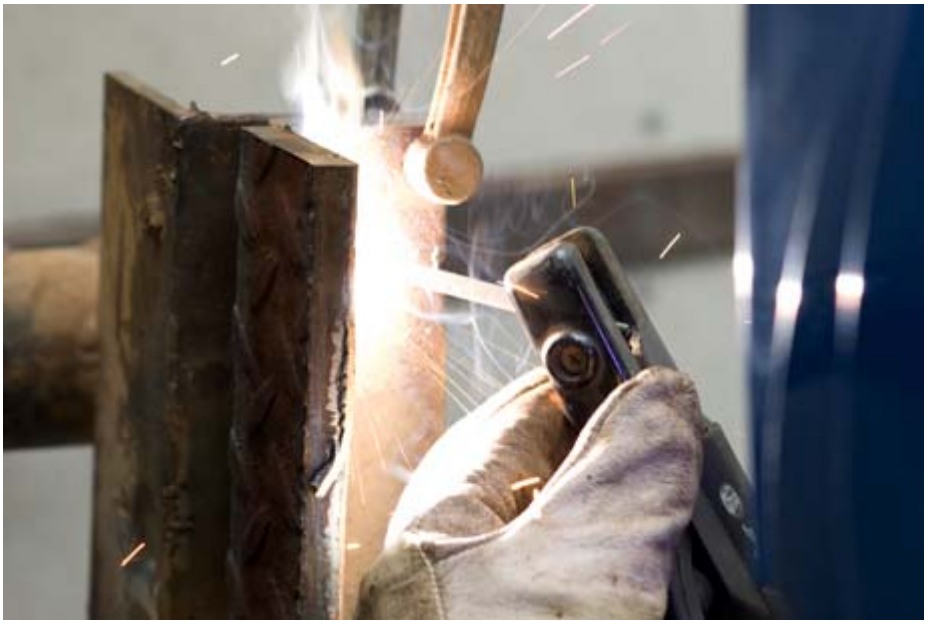
Wayne Rush has difficulty welding together aluminum on his first try, being unable to control the delicate bead.



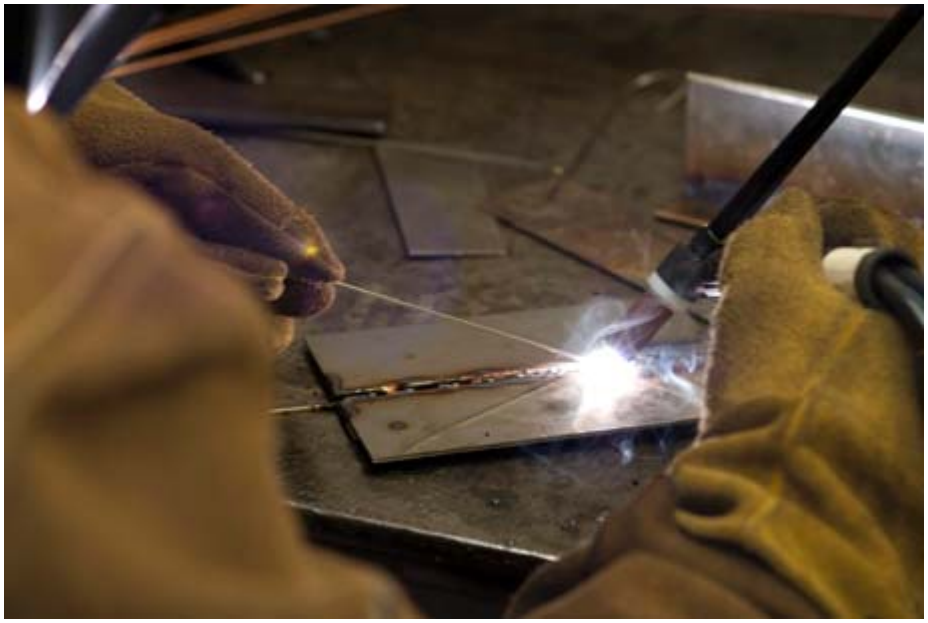
As Wayne Rush attempts to weld the aluminum, other students look on to learn the process from his experience.



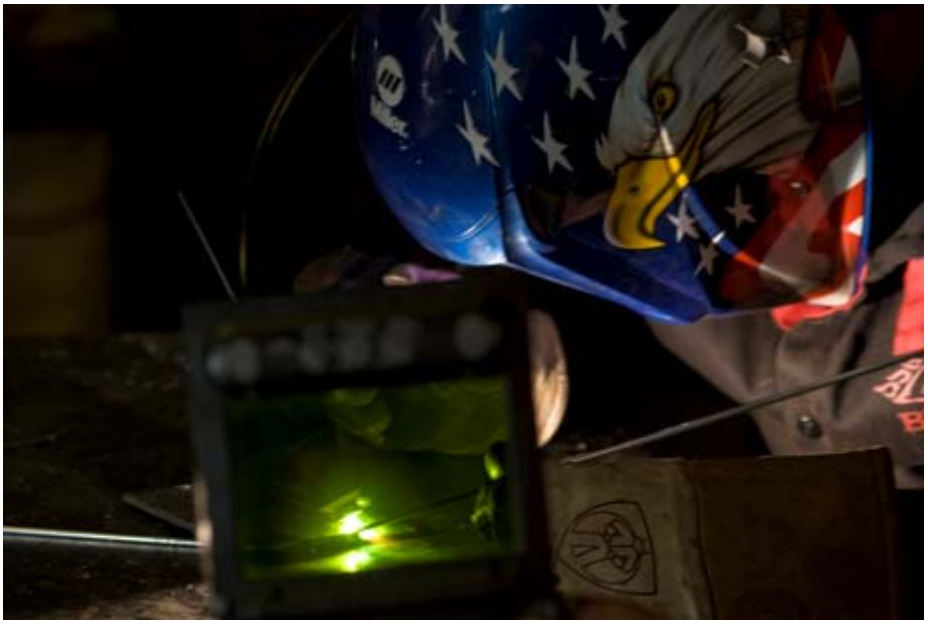
Nathan Szafranski grinds away debris to fabricate a certification plate. A certification test can take up to four hours to complete.



Rupert Reyes must keep the molten metal bead moving upward without dripping to complete a vertical weld.



Paul Jones must maintain a specific temperature while he welds stainless steel plates to prevent damage to the metal from heat fluctuations.



Welding screens can be adjusted to block more light and offer protection against retinal damage from the bright welding arc. The screen offers a glimpse at the molten bead being formed by Brandon Knox.

Photos, story and video by Chris Parker