

Tresckow man solos with Civic Partnership's help

■ With a scholarship from the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, Jason Bellitts got a degree that led to a job and a business. All he had to do was agree to live and work in the area for three years after graduating.

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If Jason Bellitts didn't get a scholarship, he would never have achieved his dream of becoming a plumber.

But luckily, the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership offered Jason its first-year \$6,000 scholarship – \$3,000 a year for two years – that allowed him to study and obtain an associate degree in indoor environmental technology from Lehigh Carbon Community College in Schnecksville.

All Bellitts, of Tresckow, had to do was agree to live and work in the area for three years after graduation.

No problem. Bellitts has

started his own business.

When he was in high school, Bellitts knew what he wanted to do – but didn't know how he would pay for the training.

"My high school guidance counselor gave me the paperwork for the scholarship, and I applied for it," he said.

The scholarship was the difference between going to school and going to work for Bellitts.

"It was critical for me going to school," he said. "I didn't have any money at the time."

Like many plumbers, Bellitts specializes in one phase of the industry – radiant heat, which is common in flooring, like heating the floors in a heated auto garage.

"You have to lay out the (heating) grids," Bellitts said of his specialty. "The tubing is tied to the mesh (used to reinforce the concrete)."

Bellitts, for the most part, works alone. Another goal of his is that the business grows to the point that he can add

workers to help him.

Jack St. Pierre, chairman of the civic partnership's scholarship committee, said that from the beginning, Jason impressed the committee that gave him the grant.

"Jason was always very focused," St. Pierre said. "He always knew what he wanted. He is a good example that you don't need a four-year degree to be successful."

St. Pierre said donations and pledges to the scholarship fund are now being accepted.

One of the missions of the partnership is to try to stop the exodus of young people out of the area.

So the group established the scholarship program, which is aimed at providing scholarships for local students who want to pursue post-secondary educations that lead to training for jobs available in the Hazleton area.

St. Pierre said the "brain drain" this area is experiencing is hurting local industries,

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because there are not enough technical personnel available to keep the industries in our area and to attract new, high-tech industries.

"There are technical and manufacturing type skills, electrical, technical and maintenance skills, that are needed," St. Pierre said. "A lot of the manufacturing is computer assisted, and someone has to maintain that equipment."

St. Pierre said jobs available in those fields are paying up to \$15 per hour.

"At any time, there are 30 jobs open," he said. "We've

channeled out efforts to meeting those needs."

He said the whole idea behind the scholarship program was to get young people to return to the area after graduation.

"We are trying to fill a need, and at the same time, help some students achieve their goal of pursuing an education," he said. "There are a lot of young people who don't want to move, or want to move back. But they've got to find a good job."

The partnership wants to assist students who are pursuing an education in a field in

which there are job opportunities available in the Hazleton area.

When the scholarship program began, it surveyed local industries to find the types of positions that were hard to fill from the local job market. Once these skills were identified, the committee started raising money by soliciting local industries, individuals and foundations.

Those eligible for a scholarship must be pursuing a degree or certification in a two- or four-year accredited program of study.

Candidates must reside

within the boundaries of the Hazleton Area or Weatherly Area school districts, must achieve a minimum 2.75 grade-point average, must demonstrate employability and the desire to satisfy local employer needs.

Applications are due annually by May 1.

For more information on the scholarship program, or to get a 2004 scholarship application, contact Bob Skulsky, executive director of the partnership, at 455-1508 or visit www.hazletonchamber.org on the Internet.