

Posted on Thu, Mar. 06, 2008

Northwest Dade school now teaching how to operate heavy equipment

BY LAURA MORALES

Just 10 minutes after officials cut the ribbon on a new vocational school, student Serge Mombrun passed his first test.

Guided by Rick Krinock of Kelly Tractors, Mombrun delicately knocked a tennis ball off the tip of a traffic cone -- with the burly arm of a Caterpillar 416E backhoe loader.

Without touching the cone.

Mombrun is one of the first five students at the new Heavy Equipment Operator Program, part of Miami Lakes Educational Center's adult-education division.

County and school district officials gathered at the center Wednesday to inaugurate the 13-week program, which principal James Parker said will fill "a huge need."

"A lot of people are restructuring projects right now, a lot of work is being done on the roads," he said, adding that it's the only program of its kind in South Florida. After graduating, students will be able to scoop giant clods of earth in clawed buckets, sweep mounds of rubble with a bulldozer blade, and stack construction materials with loaders.

The idea for the school originated with County Commissioner Rebeca Sosa and the school district's department of workforce development.

"We need to develop training and we need the equipment for our students to have a better tomorrow," Sosa said.

She added that officials with the South Florida Water Management District promised to make jobs with the district available to graduates of the program.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez said the program comes along just at a time when the skills it provides will be much needed and that it will help improve the lives of students.

"Not everyone can have a master's degree or a Ph.D.," he said. "We're trying to uplift our community by providing real, good-paying jobs and good benefits."

The Miami Lakes Educational Center is at 5780 NW 158th St. For details, call the school at 305-557-1100.