

# NCMCA Golden Anniversary Celebration Series – October 2024

2024-10-25

We're celebrating the North Carolina Masonry Contractors Association Golden 50th Anniversary Year by highlighting some monumental events that have taken place throughout the existence of NCMCA. Each month throughout 2024 we will have articles that will showcase the history and folks that helped NCMCA get to where it is today. Please enjoy this yearlong series with our tenth article, "Masonry Education Day"

Introducing young people to masonry and other trade skills is always a challenge. But Ryan Shaver and the North Carolina Masonry Contractors Association have developed the country's premier means for doing so. What high school student doesn't like a field trip?

Ryan explains. "Masonry Education Day was an idea I had after we ran the Power Block Sessions at Mt. Pleasant High School. The Power Block allowed industry to come in once a week for 40 minutes and share with students about the opportunities that the masonry industry held for them; including being a mason, equipment operator, driving a truck, project management, estimating and other possibilities."

Masonry Education Day expanded the idea, providing students with an entire day of interaction with masonry professions of every sort. Representatives from NCMCA masonry contracting firms act as guides to groups of students as they move among hands-on exhibits provided by masonry material manufacturers, masonry contracting firms, and tool and equipment companies. As the event has evolved, various competitions for both students and masons have been added to the schedule, including the regional Carolina Qualifier for the SPEC MIX Bricklayer 500.

Ryan continues. "When Masonry Education Day started in 2016, I had over 200 high school masonry students in attendance, and we thought we had really done something, in which we had. Now eight years later, we average over 500 high school masonry student participants who are enrolled in a masonry class somewhere in North Carolina. They come to Gold Hill on a crisp autumn day and experience

masonry in person with all of our industry partners.” Stalite and Johnson Concrete have hosted Masonry Education Day at their Ben Ketchie Park since the event’s inception, providing a perfect venue and furnishing lunch for all the participants.

Ryan says, “Six years ago, I had another ‘windshield idea’ (because of all the driving I do daily across the state) and wanted to start a junior bricklayer competition that would showcase the talent of the high school masonry students in a modified, scaled down version of the SPEC MIX Bricklayer 500. How many brick can the student lay in twenty minutes? The SPEC MIX Jr. Bricklayer has expanded to multiple markets across the United States. In North Carolina we have a traveling trophy that the winner takes back to their high school. Now with the CMU Check-Off fully up and running, I had another ‘windshield idea’ this year and started the first ever Jr. Blocklayer event at the 8th Annual Masonry Education day. It’s a team event with three high school students on each team. Each team member can run a trowel, spread mortar, and put out material because this event is built around teamwork, just like it is in the real world on a job site. For 2024, we had ten schools participate for a total of 33 students. The winning team from Jesse Carson High School, Aaron Vazquez Sanchez, Jorge Clemente Garcia, and Diego Vega Silva, laid 36 block and completed their wall in under 14 minutes with the fewest number of deductions overall. We now have a traveling trophy for the Jr. Blocklayer. Jesse Carson High School will have to defend its title at the 9th Annual Masonry Education Day to regain the trophy next year.

“All the events of Masonry Education day are geared towards student interaction. The vendors who set up tutorials always have hands-on activities for the students to engage rather than like most career days where the vendors stand behind a table and hand out fliers.”

We asked Jody Wall, Executive Vice President and General Manager at Stalite and Johnson Concrete Company, to gather some thoughts from his staff about hosting Masonry Education Day. Among their comments, they say that parking was a challenge the first year. “More vehicles than we anticipated and it also had rained. We kept cars on surface parking, but sent the trucks to a grassy area behind the lake. At the end of the event, that area had been nicknamed ‘the pit’ because we were running two tractors nonstop, towing vehicles out. We’ve continuously improved parking since then. The Pit is now full gravel. One year there were so many

cars we had to park people at the Stalite office and shuttle them to the park.”

The folks at Stalite say they start prep for the event a couple weeks early to get everything ready. “Stalite and Johnson teams get excited in the days leading up to the event and are always eager to volunteer. Kill ants, mow grass, trim trees around bus lane, set up porta potties and hand wash stations, line up the sheriff and first responders, line up dumpsters, set up tents and display tables.”

Stalite says by the numbers:

1,200 lunch bags

2,400 hotdogs

10 gallons of chili poured into 2 ounce cups

10 porta potties with hand wash stations

4 dumpsters

35ish volunteers between Johnson and Stalite

“The first couple years, lunch was a bottleneck. To speed up, our Johnson sales team started stuffing the lunch bags with chips, cookies and condiments the day before. The Stalite team preps grills three days ahead and starts grilling early the morning of the event. We wrap hot dogs in foil and keep them warm in coolers. This year, because of the Helene crisis, western NC students were unable to attend so we had extra food. After the event, we sent over a pallet of water and 500 hot dogs to Asheville.”

There is always a new challenge. “One year it was really cold and we did ‘burn barrels’ from wooden pallets to keep warm. The water for mixing mortar had to be heated. Last year during the contest, a contestant cut off the tips of his fingers with a trowel. Instead of quitting, he had the first responders bandage up his hand and he finished the contest.”

The Stalite staff is pleased to say, “More locals from the Gold Hill community are coming as spectators and watching the kids in the contests.”

NCMCA President Cliff McGee says, “For the first year, I thought Ryan was crazy for coming up with an idea like this. 200 students? No way! If I do remember correctly, I think we exceeded that in year one. It was really refreshing to see all the students as

well as the vendors and industry people that showed up to help. I don't think any of us really knew what to expect (except Ryan of course.)

“One thing that happened the first year that has not happened since was that Chet and Kent Huntley volunteered to do lunch for everyone. They spent most of the night before the event barbecuing chicken. The next day while I was eating, Starling Johnson of Johnson Concrete walked up and told me what a great job we had done and that the chicken was delicious. I did what I thought was right and agreed that the chicken was excellent. In a case like this, I did not want to tell the truth and say the chicken was dry or did not have much taste. At any rate, Kent overheard me and accused me of taking credit for something I did not do. I'm not sure if this is the reason why, but we have not had chicken since. (Four or five years later, I did come clean and tell Starling that I did not cook the chicken.)

“I'm not sure what year it was, but we had a terrible rain the day and night before the event. SPEC MIX took a lot of us out for supper the night before and it was raining so hard that several of us at dinner encouraged Ryan to cancel or reschedule. I don't think we realized everything that was in place and how hard that would be to reschedule. At any rate, the next morning it stopped raining around 5:00 am and turned out to be a great day. Our host, Johnson Concrete, came through and had tractors to pull out all the Dodge and Chevy drivers that got stuck.

“At some point Ryan ‘invented’ the masonry instructor challenge. I think the first year he about killed a couple with how hard it was. It was a lot of fun to watch.

“Another add-on that everyone loves to watch are the SPEC MIX competitions. It has been great to get a crowd out to watch.”

Past NCMCA President Kent Huntley says, “I have had the pleasure of being able to attend every one of these events.

“When this idea came up, I wasn't sure how this would pan out with industry, but as always NCMCA has promoted, and this day continues to grow!

“Cliff may have told you the chicken story, but I will recount it accurately, (as I don't trust Cliff to be factual.)

“The first year, a group of us met at the site to discuss details of how this project should go. The issue of lunch came up, so Chet and I volunteered to cook barbecued chicken for the event. We finished grilling the chicken the night before the event at around 10:00 P.M. The day of the event, we had homemade desserts and grilled chicken. The food was a hit.

“After eating lunch, Cliff and I were getting dessert and Starling walked up to Cliff and me. She turned to Cliff and said, ‘Cliff, the chicken you guys prepared was wonderful!’ At that time, I looked at Cliff expecting him to correct Starling and let her know he had nothing to do with the chicken being prepared for the event. Cliff never missed a beat and said, ‘Thanks Starling. I am glad you liked it.’ As Starling walked off, I waited for Cliff to stop her and let her know he did not have anything to do with the chicken, but sadly that never happened.

“About two years ago, I told Starling the truth, as Cliff had been very misleading! It has hurt my feelings; I have been really upset for all these many years. It feels good to get this officially off my chest, so I can begin healing!

“Seriously, we have had a lot of fun recalling this story, but it is also amazing that on this day, many companies come together to share their knowledge with the students. Even though we are all competing in the same markets, we all come together for the same common goal; to help educate the many students that attend.

“At our company, we are trying to get our next generation involved in this event. Many companies are doing the same thing, and it shows the students there is a place for them. I think this is very important for our industry to bring their younger project managers, foremen, etc. to showcase what is possible.”

Columbus Career & College Academy instructor Fred Mason says, “This has been a fun event for my students and me. I think the best part is when all the different schools can sit in the stands together and cheer for their team during the Jr. Bricklayer competition. Adding the block competition was a great idea. This allows three more students to participate. I think that all the events will motivate the non-participants to work harder in the shops to earn one of those competition

spots. Students get valuable information and hand-on experience from the many vendors that attend. They can see that masonry offers other careers other than laying brick. My 'Fun Fact' from attending all these years is that I left this year with a toilet lid around my neck."

"We're very proud of our masonry students for showcasing their craftsmanship and talent," said Phillip Faggart, instructor from Jesse C. Carson High School. "These competitions highlight not only their hard work but also the rewarding career opportunities in masonry, made possible by strong partnerships with our workforce and the incredible support from local businesses and organizations. The impact of this event on our students and program is tremendous. It builds their confidence, refines their skills, and opens doors to future careers in the trades." Faggart offered congratulations to his students Ryan Gaither and tender Cameron Grubbs who claimed First Place in the Jr. SPEC MIX Bricklayer 500, and to Aaron Vazquez Sanchez, Jorge Clemente Garcia, and Diego Vega Silva who won First Place in the Jr. Blocklayer competition. "As their instructor, it was an incredibly proud moment to see all the effort they've invested in learning this trade over the past four years showcased in this competition," says Faggart.

The SPEC MIX contest team comes to Gold Hill, including Las Vegas competition host and announcer Tom Clark, for a live stream of North Carolina's Masonry Education Day. SPEC MIX Vice President Brian Carney says, "Masonry is much like a competitive sport, and the reason the JR. BRICKLAYER 500 is so popular with the younger generation. Bricklayers are not only artisans, for many kids they're like athletes that inspire them to take up the craft. And to expand the masonry workforce, it all starts with getting a trowel full of mortar into a kid's hand. At that point, the next step is giving them hands-on mentoring. Thankfully this is what Ryan Shaver envisioned and implemented over five years ago, and today the strategy has become hugely successful across North America. At each SPEC MIX BRICKLAYER 500 qualifying competition the SPEC MIX team partners with the local training programs to host a junior bricklaying contest and I couldn't be happier to say that this year we put on a record-high twenty JR. BRICKLAYER 500 events, a 30% increase over last year. Now the JR. BRICKLAYER 500 is taking place in the United Kingdom and will send a team to Las Vegas in 2025. How cool is that!"

Kent Huntley, in addition to being an NCMCA past president, is also upcoming

chairman of the Mason Contractors Association of America (MCAA) and says, “NCMCA steps up for this event and this is what the folks across the nation talk about. Just how special a group that we have.”

NCMCA President Cliff McGee adds, “I have been able to attend all the Masonry Ed days. Being able to see the masonry industry come together and make such a difference in students’ lives/careers has been amazing to watch. I think Masonry Ed Day has had a huge impact on a lot of people. I encourage anyone who can to get involved with it next year. The enthusiasm that students bring is contagious.”

NCMCA Executive Vice President Ryan Shaver concludes, “I’ve said this multiple times and keep saying it to the masonry industry: ‘We have to knock on the student’s door before they knock on ours.’ Masonry Education Day would not be possible without all the masonry contractors, associate members, and masonry industry coming together on one day to show the opportunity that our industry has for the students. From a ‘windshield idea’ to now a great reality, I encourage other parts of the country to do the same thing to impact our youth in a positive way so that they can see how good our industry really is.”

Article by Lynn Nash

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Left to right, Mount Pleasant High School students Garrett Overbay, Garrett Hammill, and Nick DeCappelle were among some 200 masonry students, instructors and school administrators who participated in the 2016 High School Masonry Day event. Johnson Concrete Company and Carolina Stalite hosted the event at their Ben Ketchie Park in Gold Hill and provided tours of the Stalite lightweight aggregate manufacturing plant.

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Participants in the 2016 High School Masonry Day at Stalite's Ben Ketchie Park in Gold Hill.

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Kelton McGee won the “Fastest Trowel on the Block” regional qualifier conducted as part of Masonry Education Day 2017 at Stalite’s Ben Ketchie Park. *Photograph by C. E. Moser.*

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Matt Cash, right, with his coach/tender Chet Huntley, won the SPEC MIX Bricklayer 500 Regional Qualifier at the 2019 Masonry Education Day event at Ben Ketchie Park. Matt won the SPEC MIX National Bricklayer 500 at Las Vegas in 2017. *Photograph by Judy Johnson.*

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William Ludwig leads the crowd in singing the National Anthem at the start of Masonry Education Day 2021. Matthew Hartsell of Gates Construction Company continued the tradition, singing the Anthem at the 2024 event. *Photograph by SPEC MIX.*

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Tim Agner (left) and Vernon Fewell grilling some of the 2,400 hotdogs consumed by the participants at Masonry Education Day 2021. *Photograph by Judy Johnson.*

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The crowd enjoying the SPEC MIX Jr. Bricklayer competition at the 2022 Masonry Education Day. *Photography by Judy Johnson.*

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Columbus Career and College Academy masonry instructor Fred Mason “wears” his trophy and shows off his prize as the winner of the 2024 Masonry Education Day “Instructors Challenge” competition. *Photograph by Taylor Grimes.*

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Ryan Gauthier (right) with his tender Cameron Grubb of Jesse Carson High School were the First Place winners of the October 2024 Masonry Education Day SPEC-MIX Jr. Bricklayer competition laying 313 brick (after deductions) in twenty minutes. *Photograph by Brandy Shaver.*

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