Student Career Days 2016 skills test winners pose on the stage in the middle of the TCI EXPO trade-show floor. With them, fifth from left, is Mark Chisholm, three-time ISA international tree climbing champion, ISA Certified Arborist, and Stihl spokesperson. Stihl is a primary partner of SCD. Linus Glady, in the green shirt, says the most nerve-wracking part of the entire competition was going up on stage in the middle of the TCI EXPO floor to accept his award.

Student Career Days 2016

Student Career Days Is a Taste of the Real Thing for Budding Arborists

By Patricia Chaudoin

Let’s say you’re a high school or college student with a love of the outdoors and a budding interest in the tree care industry. How do you decide if this is the right career path for you? A great way to test the waters is to immerse yourself in everything tree care-related during Student Career Days (SCD) at TCI EXPO.

The Tree Care Industry Association Foundation (TCIAF) runs SCD each year for three days during TCI EXPO. Students must be enrolled in an arboriculture or urban-forestry program at the high school, tech school, community college or university level to participate. Schools may be reimbursed some travel expenses through TCIAF, and often tree care companies sponsor teams from local schools and help with some of the costs associated with attending.

SCD gives participants free entry and full access to the TCI EXPO trade-show floor and all the educational seminars being held. There’s also a students-only Job & Internship Fair held the third day of TCI EXPO. But often, the biggest draw for students is the skills competition, held at a local park, where everyone has a chance to practice their techniques and learn new ones in front of professional judges and a cheering audience of their peers.

This past November in Baltimore, Maryland, the SCD competition was held at Federal Hill Park. Stations were set up for competing in Safety Gear Check (contestants work to distinguish between safe and unsafe climbing gear and personal protective equipment), Belayed Scramble (contestants climb a pre-installed rope along a pre-determined route into the tree and ring a bell when they reach the top), and Work Climb (contestants climb to stations throughout the canopy, ringing a bell to signal completion).

Joe Russell, of TCIAF member company Russell Tree Experts in Westerville, Ohio, is an alumnus of SCD; he participated in Baltimore back in 2003. Now, 14 years later, Russell is a certified arborist and the owner of his own company – and he credits SCD for helping him along his chosen career path.

“The climbing competition exposure, including the professional judges, really helped show me what a professional ar-
boriculture work environment looks like,” says Russell. He acknowledges that for him, the climbing competition was the highlight of SCD.

Tabitha “Tabby” Kennedy, a junior at Wamogo Regional High School in Litchfield, Connecticut, totally agrees. She attended SCD in Baltimore this past November with a team from her school that included several other girls. “That was my first time ever competing, and I’m so grateful I was able to do so at such a large event surrounded by so many tree-climbing enthusiasts.

“I was extremely nervous right before the Work Climb because that was my first event,” adds Kennedy, “but once I started climbing up the tree and heard my classmates cheering me on, I felt more calm. Being able to support other tree climbers and also being supported by them was a great experience.

“My biggest fear (during the competition) was that I would make a mistake and embarrass myself, but I realized that the most important thing was not to worry about the people below me,” she adds. “And all of the professionals there were extremely understanding and helpful. The experience really helped me grow out of my shell and accept help from others.”

Kennedy, who is enrolled in her high school’s Agricultural Science & Technology program, has been interested in attending SCD for the connections she could make during the job fair and for the chance to learn more about other opportunities in the field of arboriculture. “I was lucky enough to get to meet with people from a lot of different businesses,” she says.

“One woman we met gave all the girls in my group a talk about how women in the arborist field are a necessity. She told us that just because we are women, it doesn’t make us any less successful than a man in this business.”

For Linus Glady, who attended SCD the past two years and is a student at Cuyahoga Community College in Highland Hills, Ohio, the choice of a career in tree care is a done deal. The senior already has a full-time position with Independent Tree, LLC, a 10-year TCIA member company based in Newbury, Ohio – and has been offered a full-time position with them when he graduates in fall 2017.

“I’ve been with Independent Tree about a year so far,” says Glady, “doing pruning and removal, plant health care, a little bit of everything, which I really enjoy. By working for them, I’ve also been able to get my Pesticide Applicator Certification while still in school, which also helps.

“I’ve always liked the outdoors and camping and I’ve always thought trees were really interesting,” says Glady. “That’s how I decided on a career in tree care. If it means climbing trees and having fun outside, I’m all over it!”

Glady is enrolled in his school’s Plant Sciences & Landscape Technology program, which sent a team of four students and their professor to both Baltimore in 2016 and to SCD in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the year before. Glady says the local office of the Davey Tree Expert Company helped sponsor the team both years.

“I had attended other competitions before, and then my professor saw that TCIA had one and arranged for us to go to Pittsburgh, which was only a few hours’ drive away – and it was a blast! We couldn’t wait to go to Baltimore the following year!”

When asked what he enjoyed most about attending SCD, Glady says it was being cheered on by his teammates during the competition. But he quickly adds that he also enjoyed other aspects of the three-day event.

“As students, we have passes so we can go anywhere we want on the EXPO floor,” he explains. “Everybody is really happy to talk with you, especially when they find out you’re a student. We talked with people about new systems and new climbing gear – when you get a bunch of people together with a common interest like tree care, you can’t get them to stop talking!"

Glady pointed out that student attendees should not overlook the Job & Internship Fair. “This is a great place for students to go and make contacts,” he says.

“We’re hoping to send an even bigger team this year (to TCI EXPO 2017 in Columbus, Ohio),” Glady continues. “I’ll be ready to graduate, but if my professor convinces me, I might return and try to defend my title.” He carried away the 2016 first-place award in Overall Competition for the Collegiate Men’s division, and says the most nerve-wracking part of the entire competition was going up on stage in the middle of the TCI EXPO floor to accept
Glady accepted his award from Mark Chisholm, three-time ISA international tree-climbing champion, ISA Certified Arborist and Stihl spokesperson. Stihl is a primary partner of SCD and provides gift certificates for Stihl merchandise to top finishers in each event. Chisholm was also on site during the Student Skills Competition to offer climbing tips. “It’s fantastic to see so many students invested in their careers and the future of professional tree care,” says Chisholm. “This event highlights the strength and future growth of our industry.”

As a forestry major at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, and president of the Purdue Student Society of Arboriculture, Ben McCallister was totally excited to attend SCD in Baltimore with his fellow teammates. “It’s an awesome opportunity,” he says. “The best part is being on the EXPO floor, going to all the booths and meeting with people from all the different companies nationwide.”

According to McCallister, the first thing he and his four teammates did when they hit the EXPO was split up, with each heading to a different seminar. “Then we met back up later in the day to compare notes on what we’d learned,” he says. “The rest of the day we spent talking to people and looking at equipment. A few of us are real gear junkies, so it was pure heaven looking at all the ropes, saws, carabiners and harnesses. We could have spent the whole day there; they had to pry us away to get us to the afternoon sessions.

“We also brought a bunch of resumes and hit the career fair,” notes McCallister. “There were companies from Florida, California, Colorado, the D.C. area, the Midwest – pretty much everywhere. We tried to talk to as many people as possible, and everyone was very supportive and encouraging toward us as students. Since we’ve been back, all of us have gotten emails from companies offering us job interviews and other opportunities. I feel totally confident that once I graduate, I’ll have a job waiting.”

McCallister, who hopes to graduate in spring 2018, has already worked internship jobs with the local Davey Tree branch as well as Bellinger’s Tree Care in Lafayette. With a degree in forestry and a minor in urban forestry, he hasn’t decided whether to go right into the workplace or perhaps start on his master’s. “There are research opportunities with some of the major companies that really sound interesting, or I could carry on the legacy of what I’ve learned by teaching and passing along some of that knowledge.”

Either way, he plans to make the most of his final year at Purdue. “They can’t keep me away from attending Student Career Days this fall,” he says. “I’m super excited about going again – and Columbus is only a hop, skip and a jump from Lafayette!”

From an academic standpoint, Professor Howard Eyre, department chair of Plant Science at Delaware Valley University in Doylestown, Pa., says SCD has proven invaluable to his students over the years. “I have had students at TCI EXPO almost every year since 1993,” he says. “There are research opportunities with some of the major companies that really sound interesting, or I could carry on the legacy of what I’ve learned by teaching and passing along some of that knowledge.”

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“I really appreciate the openness of everyone involved in the trade show, both presenters and participants,” says Eyre. “The educational sessions and the chance to interact with people from within the industry allows me, as a faculty member, to assure myself that what’s being presented in the classroom is reflective of industry standards and presents some of the newest
Dr. Sharon Jean-Philippe, associate professor of urban forestry at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, has attended SCD with student participants for the past five years. She says the hands-on learning experience during the competition events and rubbing shoulders with tree care professionals definitely has had a positive impact on her students.

“For most of them, this is their first introduction to the tree care industry for practicing professionals,” says Jean-Philippe. “Our students are always excited to see and interact with different urban forestry, arboriculture and landscape-management professionals from across the country. “I was impressed by the fact that all our students seemed highly engaged while attending the various Student Career Days events,” she adds. “I’ve been told by many first-time attendees that they never knew the tree care industry was so large, broad and diverse, or that it integrated into so many fields.”

As arborist Joe Russell looks back on his days attending SCD, his advice for students enrolled in arboriculture, horticulture, forestry and other related programs – and specifically for the student attendees of past and future Student Career Days events – is to stay the course. “Stay excited about arboriculture,” he says. “It is a fun industry that offers tons of opportunities for advancement and innovation.”