

Designing women

Five females part of new OCC auto design program

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

When Renee Smith was in high school, she never dreamed of being an automotive designer.

"I got a job in accounting out of high school," said the 29-year-old West Bloomfield resident. "And I thought that was it."

All that changed, however, after she heard about a new co-op program initiated at Oakland Community College this year through a partnership with Engineering Technology Ltd. of Troy.

A number of people — including her brother Brian, a tool designer in Rochester — knew she was looking for new horizons and advised her to look into the program that offers an associate's degree in automotive design.

"The orientation program really intrigued me," Smith said. "So I quit my job (with an Ann Arbor company) to devote full time to the program."

The program Smith has embarked upon is designed to fill a growing need within the auto industry, said Bert Ehl, corporate vice president of ET and one of its designers.

HE'S IN A position to know. His company employs about 300 people at the Troy office doing design and engineering work for Ford, Chrysler and General Motors as well as first line suppliers, including the Bendix Corp.

The growing need for designers came about as a result of a number of changes, Ehl said, including the increasing role of computers within the automobile industry.

The draftsmen of the '60s and '70s — once among the elite of the skilled craftsmen — are no longer in demand, he said. Needed instead are people with comparable skills in math, science and spatial relationships — who also know their way around a computer keyboard.

"The people we need are something like the skilled designers of previous decades," said Bill Rose, OCC dean of academic services. "They need a lot of the same skills, but they also have to be flexible enough to work as a member of a team."

Shelley Bower, director of corpo-

rate training at ET, said to qualify for the program, prospective designers need only a high school diploma, or the equivalent. To be successful, however, they must correct any deficiencies, such as a lack of math.

"AND THEY MUST" have a 3.0 grade point average (in core subjects) before they are placed (as a co-op student) with a company," she said. "But the opportunities are enormous."

Co-op students start at \$7 per hour, she said, with flexible schedules that accommodate a class or two. Graduate designers would earn about \$26,000 annually to start, and can earn up to \$30,000 a year.

Julia Gilbert of Rochester said the program requirements are challenging, but with a little work, attainable. She was willing, for example, to repeat a trigonometry class in order to obtain the required grade point average in math.

Gilbert, however, said she had an advantage going into the program. She had, for example, taken CAD (computer aided design) at Macomb Community College, and worked as a processor of tool design information for an engineering firm in Troy.

"I used to prepare information for designers," said Gilbert, 28. "So I know what the job involves. But I've wanted to get into automotive design for a long time and this is the chance."

Gilbert was laid off from her job in March, something she viewed as an opportunity — and a lesson.

"There are no job guarantees," Gilbert said. "But the more skills I have, the better my chances of getting a good job — and keeping it."

For Betty Antonelli of Troy, getting into the auto design program "is a great opportunity to find out if it's right for me."

Antonelli, 44, has a teaching degree from a university in her native Argentina, but wanted to try designing. She said she was encouraged by her husband, Rudy, an engineer, and their two children, Luciana, 16, and Santiago, 14, both students in Avondale schools.

"They help with the washing and cooking," she said, "so I can have the time to study."

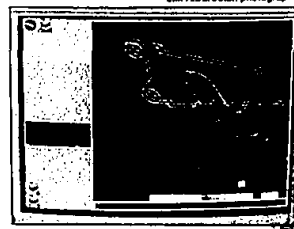
IN ITS FIRST semester, the auto design program signed up 19 students, including five women, said Bower. Some, like Gilbert and Antonelli, have qualified for co-op jobs with her company. Others, like Smith, are getting the fundamentals needed for placement.

They're also talking with companies that might sponsor co-op students.

Those interested can contact Bill Rose at the Auburn Hills campus of OCC, 340-6616, or Bower at ET, 588-4280.



Above, OCC co-op students Betty Antonelli of Troy and Julia Gilbert of Rochester (seated) get the benefit of the latest in drafting technology (right), which allows both students and professionals to take advantage of three-dimensional design techniques.



JIM RIDER/staff photographer

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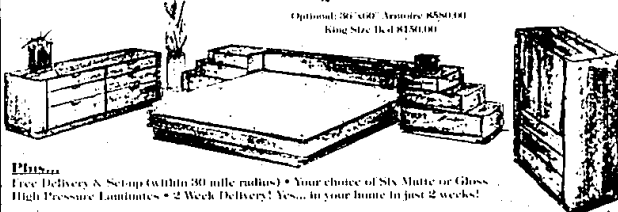
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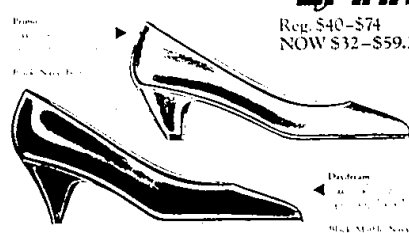
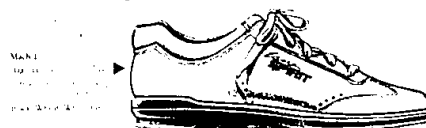
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