

COS Connects Automotive Major to Global Tool Company

When Leonor "Leo" Garcia graduated from Hanford West High School, she was uncertain of her career path. "After high school, I took a year off and dabbled, not really sure what I wanted to do," said Garcia. "I considered going into psychology or being a paralegal or veterinary tech."

Getting her own wheels ignited a passion that foretold her future. "When I was 19, I bought a '72 El Camino and did all the work to get the car running," said Garcia. "It made me feel so good knowing that I did it myself. It also brought back childhood memories of working with my dad to repair our cars."

This led to doing repairs for friends. "I really liked working on cars and making a difference for other people," said Garcia. "But I realized I was missing technical information and that's when I enrolled in the College of the Sequoias (COS) Automotive Technology program to expand my knowledge."

Several years after graduating from COS with an Associate of Science degree in Automotive Technology, Garcia is still benefiting from college relationships. When she was moving back to Visalia and seeking local employment, Garcia contacted Lisette Conway, CTE Career Services, COS. "Lisette introduced me to Hilti, a global tool manufacturer," said Garcia. "She helped me see how my automotive skills were transferrable, described the management training program and encouraged me to apply."

With over 33,000 employees worldwide, Hilti provides heavy duty, automated, specialized tools for construction companies, explained Hilti Tool Service Center Manager Dion Espino. "Hilti guarantees our customers a one-day turnaround for repair services or the tool is free," said Espino. "The Visalia service center repairs over 250 tools per day. It is a very unique business and requires skilled technicians with specialized training to repair the tools quickly."



Dion Espino, Hilti Tool Service Center Manager (left) and Leonor Garcia (right).



Successful technicians usually come to the company with transferable skills, such as experience working with heavy equipment, small engines or electronics, or maintaining their own vehicles, according to Dion. "After we interviewed Leo, she took a 'bench test' where she had to work with her hands to demonstrate her troubleshooting skills," said Espino. "Hilti is always looking for people with leadership aptitude and through the interview process we identified Leo as having development potential."

Soon afterward, Garcia was hired. "I love the fast-pace, hands-on work and solving mechanical problems," said Garcia. "When I fix something, I have a great sense of accomplishment. The Hilti work environment is wonderful and the people I work with are so helpful."

Looking to the future, Garcia sees excellent career opportunities ahead doing work she never dreamed of when she was completing her coursework in automotive technology. “Each employee has a personal success plan and I’m really excited about the opportunity to grow within the company,” said Garcia. “There are multiple levels of promotions and eventually, I could even qualify for positions at other facilities around the state or world.”

This success story was the result of both Espino and Garcia being connected by Conway through COS CTE Career Services. “I met Lisette at a job fair several years ago and invited her to tour Hilti’s facilities,” said Espino. “I was looking for good employees and Lisette helped me arrange a tour of our Visalia center for students with repair skills. Giving back to the community is part of our culture so we were also able to donate Hilti tools to COS programs.”

According to Espino, it is a very competitive market for hiring skilled technicians with so many distribution centers in the area. “Repeatedly, Lisette has been very responsive when I let her know we are hiring,” said Espino. “She announces the job opening to manufacturing, automotive and industrial maintenance students. Then, she collects and screens resumes. Working with COS to recruit skilled technicians is so much more effective than posting a job opening online.”

Similarly, Garcia kept in contact with Conway after she graduated from COS, started her own mobile automotive repair service and earned several promotions at an auto parts retailer. “If I needed a reference when applying for a job, I could count on Lisette being reliable and getting back to me,” said Garcia. “When I was the assistant manager for an auto parts store, Lisette would ask me to represent the company at job fairs. Whenever we could, we’d help each other.”

COS Career Services also offered a host programs that Garcia took advantage of as a student. “I did everything I could while I was in school to take responsibility for utilizing the resources,” said Garcia. “Lisette was amazing at connecting me with opportunities. I went to resume building workshops, networking luncheons with business owners and dress for success presentations that included vouchers for a department store.”

Garcia credits the COS faculty with providing an education that prepared her for her career. “The COS faculty members were outstanding,” said Garcia. “Several instructors offered to be references for me and connected me with job offers. I was also able to attend professional automotive training and earn a certificate at no charge because I was a student.”

To support herself while going to school, she worked at a pizza restaurant and recommends that students utilize all the programs offered by COS. “The free bus pass was a life saver for a struggling student,” said Garcia. “The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) provided book vouchers, printing services and resources. I even won a \$1000 scholarship by writing an essay.”

Networking is another skill she learned at COS that has paid dividends. “Some students are closed off and in their own little world,” said Garcia. “There is so much to gain by being open to attending events and meeting new people. You never know where it may lead.”

Her message to other students is to have a game plan and embrace every opportunity. “Look at where you want to be and do everything you can to get there,” said Garcia. “Don’t take the path of least resistance. You have to climb mountains and do the most you can do to push yourself toward your path to success.”

