NEVER TOO OLD FOR LEARNING

College can be intimidating—especially if you’re 42 years old.

“I was nervous, mainly scared,” says Patrick Cofield, a Houston native who hadn’t been in a classroom in 20 years. “I’ve worked in construction for a long time. I felt stuck and wanted to train myself for better jobs. But I didn’t want to go sit in a classroom—and with a bunch of kids.”

But Patrick has learned that college is not just for “kids” anymore. When his wife Jessica went back to Lone Star College to get a nursing credential, she convinced him to look into Lone Star’s building trade programs. He found a very unusual welding class: a 3-month, 80-hour course that integrates basic math with trade skills. It, like the 18 other Accelerate TEXAS programs statewide, is designed to quickly move adult students through ABE into and through college and career training.

Patrick’s classmates ranged from age 23 to 41. “Their skill levels really varied,” he recalls. “We started math by doing 10x10 and I thought, ‘I already know all this.’ But some people didn’t, so we helped each other through the basics. I even learned stuff I thought I knew.”

“Everything we learned in the classroom linked to what we were doing in the shop,” Patrick says. “We were learning complex fractions and the metric system, which you really need in any construction trade. The class really picked up quickly.”

By October, Patrick and his classmates had completed the program and been certified as MIG and Flexcore welders, qualified for union work such as heavy machinery assembly and maintenance.

Since January, Lone Star College has trained 255 Accelerate TEXAS students in welding, machinery, accounting, nursing, and phlebotomy. Roughly 80 percent have completed their courses and are now working in their trained fields.

Welding was not Patrick’s first career choice. A highly recruited basketball star in high school, he had dreams of going pro until a knee injury ended that. Dejected, he dropped out of high school in his senior year to work in road construction.

“I always knew I’d go back to education,” he says. “I got my GED later so I could apply for more jobs. I was making $15 an hour but knew I had to specialize in something in order to move up.”

Patrick had welded on the job before Accelerate TEXAS, but when one of his instructors complimented his work, he knew he’d found his calling. “That encouragement from your teacher—who’s also a certified welder—that’s all it took,” Patrick says. “I love doing something that not everyone can do and seeing the end result.”

Patrick is well on his way to a life-long career. Just weeks after being certified, he landed an $18-per-hour temp-to-hire job at National Oil Well Varco, welding oil rig and tractor parts. His next step? Going back to Lone Star
in January to earn his TIG certification, the next in a series of stacked credentials that will enable him to weld stainless steel, aluminum, and other thin metals. “Once I have that, I can apply for jobs that pay around $25 an hour. Plus, I’ll get my own welding equipment and do freelance work on the side,” he adds. “I’ve got friends in the business that say they have work for me once I finish this next program.”

Patrick talks up Lone Star’s Accelerate TEXAS program to anyone who asks, urging friends to broaden their own career opportunities. “I tell people to go over there. If you think you’re too old for college, you’re dead wrong. I thought I was.” Especially with a third child on the way, Patrick says he’s glad he found the motivation—and Accelerate TEXAS—to help him earn more and further his career. “I’m so glad I came back and stuck with it.”