

# NORTH'S AUTO BODY COLLISION CENTRE



[www.northsautobody.com](http://www.northsautobody.com)

**2003 Automotive Trades Association Industry Capacity Builder Award for Nova Scotia Winner**

*Recognizing outstanding commitment, leadership and development of higher business, social and professional standards in the collision repair industry.*

## The Employer

Owned by Blaine and Karen North, and managed by their son Fred, North's Auto Body Collision Centre is a family business with a 30+ year history of providing collision repair services to Nova Scotians. Now located in Kentville, Nova Scotia, the Norths first set up shop in Canning for 21 years, before moving to Kentville 11 years ago.

What keeps a family business going since 1975? Work, passion and a commitment to learn and grow. While Fred admits that a family business comes with its own set of issues such as not being able to leave work at the office, it is obvious from seeing the three Norths interact in their customer-friendly office, that for them, the pay-offs outweigh the drawbacks. Fred believes that in a family-owned business, it is easier to feel personal pride and a dedication to high standards. Blaine still finds it exciting to hear a customer's "wow" when they see a truck or car restored to its pre-damaged state. Karen, for her part, has invested a lot of time and energy learning everything there is to know about the management side of running a growing business, going back to school repeatedly to take accounting, entrepreneurial, marketing, and computer courses.



## Open for business, open for questions

"We believe that the customer-driven business reaps a never-ending customer base" it reads, front and centre on the North's Auto Body Collision Centre website. With obvious pride, Karen explains how North's goes out of its way to earn its superior reputation. It all adds up: A clean and comfortable reception area; friendly, knowledgeable staff; state-of-the-art technology, and that extra bit of service, like "picking up and delivering vehicles, or providing courtesy cars for those who don't have insurance coverage provide for rentals". In January of 2006 customer Allan A. Arney wrote, "The extra effort and adjustment of schedules incorporated to alleviate any extra stress upon me and my family during this time goes well beyond what anyone could expect. It gave me a 'down home family business' feeling."

Questions are welcome here! The customer information pamphlets, the online status report tracking capability, and the offer of help with filling out insurance forms, all point to open communications with customers. "Questions help" says Fred, both of keeping customers in the loop and of gauging true interest in a job shadowing student.

## Reaching out to youth

Standing behind the presentation board used to show students various aspects of the industry, Karen talks about going to career fairs at Kings Tech campus, Middleton, Avonview, Windsor and schools from the whole Annapolis Valley. When Blaine and Karen speak to youth, they emphasize the importance of education, and how school work relates to industry work, especially the math and technology. "We encourage them to learn about the trade," says



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## Kentville, NS



Karen, "to investigate career and training opportunities, and to register for co-op programs."

Karen North stresses to students that "Your attitude is everything. We can teach you skills, but attitude goes a long way." Karen would like to see colleges set up sessions, allowing employers to interview students. "It would be beneficial to teachers employers and students" to go through a process that mirrors real life job interviews. Amongst other things it would give those students who expect to walk into management positions a reality check.

North's, a shop of 12 employees, goes out of its way to give young people an opportunity for building their skill sets. At any one time North's will take on students from area high schools, from college and youth at risk programs, and will provide them placements ranging from one-day, one-day-a-week to full work experience hours. North's gives area students lots of opportunities to explore employment opportunities in the collision repair industry, and to test their aptitude for working in it.

Every Tuesday throughout the school year, students come to North's to get some work experience. A typical job shadowing experience at North's exposes students to all aspects of the work in the shop, with an emphasis on the attention to quality and detail required. "They are encouraged to take the initiative, ask questions and get involved," says Fred. "A lot have never touched the tools we use."

As an illustration of how technological advanced the industry is, students are shown the SHARK ultrasonic sound wave frame measurement system, (the first in the Annapolis Valley) the computerized colour matching, the cameras and computers, and the electrical dent pulling machines. Until they see these things, they don't realize "how computer driven today's cars are, how there is more technology in this trade than in many other trades," says Fred. And until they see this, says Blaine "Youth are not interested; don't think our industry has what will get them excited."

Beyond discovering the technology, students who come to North's for work experience can get a good sense of how well they are suited for the collision repair industry based on their work experience performance worksheet. On it, they are evaluated on career related skills, personal management skills and interpersonal skills.

### **Maintaining the standard**

Fred is quick to point out that the focus on training and learning that he emphasizes with students also holds for the shop. "We maintain the I-CAR Gold Class Professionals designation." For a business to earn that designation, all employees in the shop involved in repair or estimate work must have earned 5 tested points of training. In order for the shop to maintain its Gold Class status, employees working directly in repair or estimating have to earn an additional 2 points of ongoing training annually. Quarterly reports on the status of the individual employees and overall business provide the information required to plan and schedule that training.

### **This job's for you, if ...**

Regardless of whether students come for work experience, job shadowing or as co-op placements, or apprentices, Fred feels they get a sense of "the high level of pride in their work" that everyone shares at North's, the satisfaction of a job well done.

When looking at potential new hires, Fred looks at three main criteria, "past experience, education, as well as objectives and goals." The people who are right for the job "need to be able to think on their own, problem solve, be mechanically inclined, have the patience it takes to work with the properties of metals such as high tensile steel." It also helps to have a bit of artistic flair.

But in the end, Karen, Blaine and Fred agree, it comes down to attitude. "If you are passionate about the industry," says Karen, "and demonstrate punctuality and a good work ethic, you can do well".

***"The North's outstanding leadership and history in connecting with schools, educators and students is an exemplary model of how small to medium size organizations can improve their recruitment and retention efforts. Their dedication to provide career exploration opportunities for young people is making a great contribution to their community and industry at large."***

***- Corrie Robley, Executive Director,  
NS Automotive Human Resource Sector Council,  
President, Association of Industry Sector Councils***



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