

Preparing our kids for a global economy



Margaret LeBrun, editor

We're hearing a lot these days about the coming shortage of skilled workers. In some industries, quite a few good jobs are already going unfilled for lack of talent. Among these are health care and — who would have thought, just a few short years ago — manufacturing.

New Work, New Progress, New Future is the theme of this year's New North Summit, planned on Friday, Dec. 14 at the Blue Harbor Resort in Sheboygan. The keynote speaker, Ed Gordon, plans to deliver a talk that will challenge every one of us in Northeast Wisconsin to think differently about how we prepare our youth and train our workforce for available jobs.

Author of "2010 Meltdown — Solving the Impending Jobs Crisis" and a recognized international expert on training, careers, and education related to business and economic development, Gordon shares a sense of urgency that we need to take action asap if we want to hold on to our way of life in America. We have to look at this as we looked at Sputnik, he says, when the race to the moon spurred an emphasis on math and science.

As I prepared for a phone interview with him, I imagined that he would talk about how Americans lag behind much of the world in preparing our youth for the future. I recalled how last summer, my 13-year-old son complained that his schoolmate, whose parents hail from India, was not allowed to hang out with friends until mid-afternoon because he was required to study math every day. A sixth-grader in my 11-year-old son's carpool had won a statewide math competition last spring. His parents are from China; his dad is coach of the school's Math Counts competitive club. They tell me it's a lot of fun — if you love math.

Now, I believe it's healthy to "let kids be kids," but what I've read about

globalization in recent years ("The World is Flat" and "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" by Thomas Friedman, to name a few) makes me wonder if we're doing enough to prepare them for the future economy. By "we" I mean everyone, in the New North, in Wisconsin, nationwide. Gordon told me flat out: We are not. Indeed, we are allowing our kids to choose careers with little context, aside from what they see on TV and the Internet. We are allowing them to let books gather dust, to think that you can find the answer to any question on the Web without emphasizing the critical thinking skills required to sift the truth from the pabulum. "You can't click for brains," Gordon likes to say.

There's also a major disconnect between what business and industry needs and what schools are preparing students for, he says. For more insight from the guru, see page 12. Better yet, plan to hear his talk at the New North Summit (go to www.thenewnorth.com for details).

One of many manufacturers in need of highly skilled workers in our region is Tower Tech Systems, Inc. in Manitowoc, which makes towers for the wind turbine industry. President and Chief Operating Officer Ray Brickner, on this month's cover, says they have the facility, the equipment, the orders — they just need to get all their workers trained and hire a few more before they can ramp up production to capacity.

How four business partners launched the business just four years ago and today are geared up to be a major competitor in the wind power industry is quite a story in itself. Their story begins on page 22.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret LeBrun". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.