Around Waco

by Caitlin Giddens

A discussion with GWAMA Director Brandon Cope

Manufacturing Excellence

Igniting passions, building a better future

Brandon Cope, the new director of Greater Waco Advanced Manufacturing Academy (GWAMA), met with Wacoan Editor Caitlin Giddens during his third day on staff. But he doesn’t act like he’s new to the position. In the school hallways he greets students with fond familiarity and genuine enthusiasm. While in the campus workshop at 2401 J.J. Fenty Road, he discusses the equipment and machinery with authority. Cope is prepared to serve GWAMA’s mission: equipping high school students to enter the mechanical and manufacturing workforce.

WACOAN: Tell me about the mission of GWAMA.

Cope: The mission is to offer students an alternative in education. It’s a high school path for students looking for something different. There’s a great need for students with mechanical and technical skills. This program is designed to make students more marketable employees. The school has a technical focus, but the skills will transcend beyond the technical or industrial job force.

WACOAN: GWAMA is in its second school year. How did GWAMA first come to fruition?

Cope: It started as a joint venture between Waco ISD and some of our business partners in Waco. They felt there was a need for skilled employees and approached the schools about developing a program.

WACOAN: Is this need specific to Waco?

Cope: There is a great need in Waco. There has been a lot of industrial growth in the past few years, so there’s a need for students with this type of skill. The jobs are available here, and they’re good-paying jobs.

WACOAN: What has caused this growing need in Waco’s job market?

Cope: More businesses are coming to Waco. We’re looking at more industrial growth in the area.

WACOAN: What inspired you to get involved with the academy?

Cope: I got involved because I think this type of education is vastly important nationwide. We have a number of students in Waco who needed an opportunity like that. I’m a strong believer in technical education. When I saw there was an opportunity to be a part of a program like this, it meshed well with my beliefs and background.

WACOAN: Do you come from a technical background?

Cope: I’m from a long line of construction workers and superintendents. I was raised with
family members on the job site.

WACOAN: What was your job before becoming director of GWAMA?

Cope: I was the principal at Crestview Elementary. Before that, I was assistant principal at Waco High School and a math and algebra teacher at Cesar Chavez [PDS] Middle School. I’ve had some of the [GWAMA] students when I was the principal or teacher, so I’ve developed relationships with them.

WACOAN: How is working with GWAMA different than your previous positions?

Cope: This is a junior and senior level program, so the students are older. One of the big differences is that the kids want to be here. It’s their choice, and they’re excited about being here. It’s a magnet school that requires an application, so it’s not a campus based on a geographical location.

WACOAN: What are the requirements for a student to attend the academy?

Cope: The students have to complete an application process, and they’re chosen from the application. It’s not Waco ISD only—we’re open to all districts. We’d love to see students from all the neighboring districts represented at GWAMA.

WACOAN: What other schools are involved?

Cope: Waco ISD, McGregor, Moody, La Vega, Crawford, Midway, Riesel, China Spring and Clifton are a few.

WACOAN: What types of classes do the students take?

Cope: Students take a math and science course while they’re here. And they take one of the academy courses, which is either precision manufacturing, welding or [electronics and] robotics. We’re working on different classes, but those are the three main academies.

WACOAN: Do students take core classes as well?

Cope: Yes, it’s a half-day program. They spend half a day at their home campus and then come to us in the morning or afternoon based on what track they’re on. All of the students are still enrolled in their home campus.

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WACOAN: Why does the school focus on those three main academies?
Cope: Those were part of the original design of the campus. Those three paths were great options for students because they are needed in the workforce.
WACOAN: GWAMA takes pride in teaching students intricate and sophisticated work. Tell me more about that.
Cope: There’s nothing basic to building a robot because the activity lends itself to extreme detail. From a welding perspective, there are different types of skills. The students have multiple options. In precision metalwork, they’re taking a blank piece of steel and making something intricate.
WACOAN: Are the students aware of the intricacy of this type of work?
Cope: The campus recruiters do a good job of letting the students know. When students get here, it’s still an eye-opening experience because of the level of precision and detail. It’s a rigorous program. We’re preparing them to walk out and get a job. It’s a learning process, but the expectations are really high.
WACOAN: What other real world skills do the students gain?
Cope: We teach them interview and resume skills, which are things an employer is looking for. We want our students to be able to walk into an interview and blow the interviewer away.
WACOAN: Is this part of the school curriculum?
Cope: They have seminars throughout the semester that look at specific skills and aspects of getting a job. Our advisory council will set up mock interviews to inform the student. A lot of high school students walk out of school without ever having an interview. This helps them eliminate the stress and fears that students have going into an interview so they can highlight their skills.
WACOAN: Do you have safety lessons embedded in the curriculum?
Cope: Safety is first and foremost. Students receive a minimum 10-hour safety course. They are taught the proper

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procedures for using all the equipment or campus, and they know that there is no compromising safety. We have systems where students are looking for hazards and being preventative; we’re looking for the potential problem before it hits. We want to be proactive instead of reactive. And we encourage our students to be accountable to each other.

**WACOAN:** Do the school projects teach students to work in a team setting?

**Cope:** Some of our projects are constructed in a way that multiple students are working on the same project. They have to work cooperatively throughout the entire process. That’s an important skill for them to have, and it teaches them how to cooperate and communicate. The key to working with others is communication.

**WACOAN:** How does GWAMA’s curriculum differ from that of other high schools?

**Cope:** It’s more project-based learning. Students are working and doing it. It’s less paper and pencil type of work, which is the customary learning system. Instead, it’s day-to-day practice. They receive repeated exposure to a skill and learn the theory behind the skill, and then they get the hands-on application so they can go out and do it.

**WACOAN:** Tell me about the instructors at the academy.

**Cope:** That’s one key to the success of this program. The teachers’ passion and dedication sets the tone of what GWAMA is about. The staff is highly qualified, and most are experts within their fields of study. One of my welding instructors taught welding at Texas State Technical College. They all have a great array of experience.

Our instructors want their students to be successful after high school and not just during high school. I think the teachers enjoy coming to work because they get to work on projects all day.

**WACOAN:** GWAMA has several local business partners. How does that enrich the program?

**Cope:** Our business partners are another part of the success of the program. They’re the potential...
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WACOAN: Who are some of GWAMA’s business partners?

Cope: Trane Inc., T Squared Manufacturing, Capstone Mechanical, Caterpillar Inc., Central Texas Iron Works. We partner with TSTC through a dual credit program. So, not only can students gain skills, they can earn class credit.

WACOAN: Do you see many students enroll in TSTC after this program?

Cope: We have some students that go down their path. We have some that are ready to go straight into workforce and some who go to a four-year university. We have opportunities to meet all students’ needs.

WACOAN: Do the students have professional mentors?

Cope: That’s something that we’re in the process of developing. Now, the business partners are willing to come in and work with our students. They’re great mentors on a big scale because they speak to the students and invite them to the job site. We’re hoping to expand that on a small scale. We had a run from Central Texas Iron Works show up just last week and speak to the students. Our partners come visit all the time. Those relationships are so important.

WACOAN: As the school director, what do you try to instill in these students?

Cope: Expectations. I want my students to know that their best is the minimum. Our business partners want the best of the best. I want our students to have a strong work ethic and be coachable.

WACOAN: In this position and elsewhere, what have your students taught you?

Cope: They may not come from the best backgrounds, but they’re willing, and they’re going to be successful. It’s a different type of drive than I have. They
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Each have their own desire and 'the why' for what they do. As they teach us who they are, it helps us teach them what they need to know.

WACOAN: What are some success stories you’ve seen?

Cope: We have students that were struggling in their home high schools. When they come here, they flourish, and their attitude toward education changes. Their attitude in general changes.

WACOAN: What sparks this change in students?

Cope: If a student knows that you care about them and you give them something they’re interested in, they’ll go to the infinite degree for you. That’s the key to teaching in general. You have to develop a quality relationship first and foremost. And if you offer them a curriculum that they’re passionate about — even if it’s math or reading — they’ll be successful.

The key to education is quality relationships with students and presenting the curriculum in a platform that is exciting to the students. That is my philosophy on education. Without one of those two things the student won’t be as successful as he can be.

WACOAN: How are GAMA graduates different from other students?

Cope: We’re making students equipped and qualified before they graduate. For those students that want to go directly into the workforce, they will have better opportunities.

WACOAN: How do you think GAMA will affect your business partners in the future?

Cope: Every one of these partners say they have a shortage of quality employees. So, providing them with a student that has a foundation of skills is allowing the partners to expedite their human resources processes.

WACOAN: What are your long-term hopes for the academy?

Cope: We hope to reach more students. We want to have a high placement level in terms of the job market and continue to increase our dual credit numbers. I want this campus to be a model of excellence for this type of education.