



# REVVING UP

STUDENTS' SKILLS

WITH MOTORSPORTS

By Ingrid Thomas



Not only are students getting hands-on experience, they will graduate from Parkland with skills that are applicable to real-life situations, such as teamwork, leadership and critical thinking.

**C**ar engines roar as the announcer calls the start of the driving competition, with each driver vying for that first place title. Sounds of merriment fill the air as the crowd cheers on. No, this isn't NASCAR, this is an organized drag car competition that Parkland College students are participating in. Drag racing is just one of the exciting sporting activities that students enrolled in the college's Engineering Science and Technologies program get an opportunity to be part of.

The college, located in Champaign, Illinois, has provided affordable career-tech and academic education to area residents since 1966. It serves a district of about 235,692 residents, 62 communities and 30 high schools. Since it was established, more than 219,000 students have attended Parkland. Today, about 31 percent of students graduating from the district high schools enroll at Parkland, and no doubt some of them end up as members of Parkland Motorsports—revving up their racecar engines.

### **Parkland Motorsports**

Parkland Motorsports, a student-run organization, gives automotive technology students the opportunity to experience motorsports beyond the classroom. They work on cars, plan an annual car show, attend the Chicago auto show, and take automotive-related business trips. The organization owns three racecars, which include a UMP Sportsman dirt car, a 1980 Chevy Malibu drag car, and a 1990 Honda Civic, all driven by students competitively. Although the Honda Civic required little repairs and changes this season, the other two cars were revamped. The UMP Sportsman,

donated in late 2007, is one of the latest projects Parkland students have worked on when they rebuilt the car's chassis and engine. Exercising the automotive skills they acquired through the program, students completely disassembled the car, repaired the frame, assembled the engine, and re-assembled the car. The turnaround time to complete this overhaul was quick because the goal was to have the car finished in time for racing in late April.

Students are training to drive the 1980 Chevy Malibu drag car for bracket racing competition throughout the summer and fall 2008 season. This drag car, donated in 2000, has been operational for seven years and has undergone maintenance, including the installation of fresh rings and bearings in the engine, and a new gear in the transmission. The gear change will allow quarter-mile racing at Gateway International Raceway in Joliet, Illinois.

"The local autocross schedule begins at the start of April and we hope to participate in one event every month through the fall," said Jonathan Ross, Parkland Motorsports adviser. Participating in competitions and events may sound like fun and games but there are requirements students must meet before they are permitted to take part. In addition to maintaining a minimum 2.5 GPA, and having a current driver's license, students are expected to crew for a car a minimum of two events and do practice runs before they can receive consent to drive in competitions.

**Ingrid Thomas**

is ACTE's marketing, programs and communications coordinator. She can be contacted at [ithomas@acteonline.org](mailto:ithomas@acteonline.org).



Through Parkland Motorsports students are able to build partnerships with local businesses. The latest is with Bob Pierce Racecars, in Oakwood, Illinois. Through this partnership, students will assemble one of Pierce's award-winning modified dirt car chassis in class.

"This is an example of a great partnership. Parkland College gets to work on some of the best products in the industry, and Bob Pierce gets to have his products in the hands of some people who might never have had the opportunity," said Ross.

### Gaining Vital Skills

Not only are students getting hands-on experience, they will

graduate from Parkland with skills that are applicable to real-life situations, such as teamwork, leadership and critical thinking.

"No other homework assignment allows students to practice the skills they need for today's workforce. Given the chance to drive provides the motivation needed for our students to rise to the challenge," Ross said.

Since 1999, Parkland Motorsports has held an annual car show. This year students have worked fervently to ensure its success. Ross said time and communication are key elements needed to put on a show of this type, and it challenges students to reach out to their community.

"We have the process to organize the event set up very well. Job descriptions for each job go a long way in producing a well-run event. We do our best to take care of our participants."

Event funding has been obtained from business partners and students have marketed this event throughout the community to ensure its success.

### Automotive Technology Program

Students who participate in Parkland Motorsports are enrolled in the associate in applied science (AAS) degree program, which prepares them for entry-level technical positions at auto dealerships and independent service centers. The program is certified by The National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation (NATEF), and combines NATEF-certified training with hands-on training. Using the latest in automotive technology and business instruction, students gain the technical and managerial skills needed to succeed in automotive-related fields. Students who earn this degree can pursue numerous careers, including parts manager, service writer, automotive technician, and service manager. In addition to the AAS degree program, students can earn automotive and specialized certificates that offer short-term training and increase





their employability skills. Students who earn these certificates can go on to pursue careers in automotive collision repair and automotive service.

### **The Diesel Power Pulling Team**

The Diesel Power Pulling Team is a student-run, instructor-supervised group. Students on this team learn what it takes to build, operate, maintain and compete in the motorsport of tractor pulling; the tractors pull 10,000 and 12,000 pounds in competition and the program has two tractors: a John Deere 6030 and an International Harvester 966. Students are building a third tractor in hopes to have all three ready to compete in the 2008 season. Diesel Power Pulling Team adviser Mark Ziegler says he tries to teach students invaluable skills and values.

“These range from technical skills like troubleshooting, diagnosis and repair to workplace ethics,” he said. “All of these and more are what dealers are looking for in a quality student.”

As with Parkland Motorsports, students participating in the Diesel Power Pulling Team must meet requirements before they are selected to drive in competitions. At the start of each tractor pulling season, a drivers’ meeting is held for all students in the club who want to be considered for the summer competitions. Topics covered during the meeting include safety, driving skills, and loading and unloading the tractors.

“As a rule of thumb we try to let each club member pull at their hometown or close to their hometown,” said Ziegler. “After that it is just a matter of who is available on any given night.”

Throughout the year, students reach out to the community

and local sponsors to raise funds needed to maintain the tractors. Students display their dedication and passion by donating their own time to work on the repairs after class, and local sponsors donate funds. Ziegler said the students work very hard all year long and rely heavily on working together to ensure the club’s success.

“It truly is a team effort because without each person doing their part, the club would not exist,” he said.

### **Diesel Power Equipment Technology Program**

Students who are members of the Diesel Power Pulling Team are also enrolled in the Diesel Power Equipment Technology Program, which was created in response to employer demands. Students learn skills in electronics, hydraulics, power trains, and diesel engines. The college assists students with internship placements. Through a paid internship, they gain hands-on experience by working with local diesel equipment dealers as part of their studies. With this degree, students can pursue technician careers in diesel, farm equipment, heavy equipment, or recreational vehicle repair.

The college is providing students a quality education while allowing them to fulfill their motorsports fantasies. From team leading and building to organizational skills and test time management, these programs and activities prepare students for real-world experience while encouraging positive sportsmanship.

“The students get to experience competition firsthand, which can mean winning and losing,” said Ziegler. “Above all we stress safety, having fun and maintaining a good attitude.” **T**