

## Feature

# A Front Row Seat to Rig Work

For decades, drilling and service rig companies relied on farming communities as labour pools. These communities were a perfect match for the needs of rig work. Off-season in a farming community was high season for the rigs. And as an additional benefit, farm workers were at ease with the mechanical knowledge needed to maintain and operate rigs.

Then the population in rural areas thinned out as smaller numbers of farmers worked larger tracts of land. By the 1990s, it became clear to drilling and service rig companies that their prime labour pool wasn't the endless well it once was. The industry would need to shift its recruiting focus.

One of the biggest hurdles in attracting a new generation of rig crews is the remoteness of the work. Occasionally rigs crews find themselves on a job right next to a major highway, but more often they are several kilometres and many meandering turns away from any population. Rural communities have some exposure to rigs, but this equipment is truly foreign to urban populations. Additionally, the industry's poor safety record from the 1970s and 1980s also dissuades both students and their influencers – career counsellors and parents – from seriously considering the career path.

When Calgary announced it would host an international trades competition in 2009, CAODC grabbed hold of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to overcome the industry's recruiting hurdles. WorldSkills was uniquely the right place for CAODC to send a positive message about skilled career paths in rig work.

Firstly, the scope of the event was enormous: at WorldSkills,

tradespeople from around the world compete in specially designed competitions to earn the title of "best in their trade." The 55 competitions required thousands of tonnes of equipment and all of the ground space at Calgary Stampede Park. More than 50,000 students from across Alberta were brought to Calgary to see the competition.

Secondly, WorldSkills is specifically structured to showcase the benefits of a career in trades. The drilling industry, with its recently designated Rig Technician trade, was a perfect fit for the event. The drilling industry couldn't offer a competition like the more established trades do. Only Canada provides a journeymen certification for drilling rig crews which meant a Canadian team of Rig Technicians could compete only against each other.

However, the size of the event could accommodate a large enough space to bring in a rig and allow students and public to get a close look at the real thing and watch, first hand, a rig crew at work. Ensign Energy offered an Automated Drilling Rig from their Encore division. The Ensign and Encore team came up with a ten-minute show where a driller, derrickhand and motorhand raised a section of pipe into the rig's derrick and "made a connection" by attaching that pipe to the section of pipe that, in normal operations, would extend into a wellbore. (The



rig operations avoided actual drilling so as to keep the asphalt underneath intact.) An emcee narrated the show, explaining to the audience the process and providing key messages about today's rig work: the industry's poor safety record is a thing of the past, and the drilling industry's skilled workforce has taken its place in the trades community.

Over 10,000 students, parents, teachers and general public stopped over the four days to watch the show in or near the bleachers. Additionally, the CAODC drilling rig venue had some of the best recruiters the industry could offer: over 50 motorhands, derrickhands, drillers and rig managers from eight different member companies were on shift rotations to share their first-hand knowledge about the work and career path.

The show went a long way both in capturing young people's imaginations and in revising some old notions about the industry. The positive impact this event will be felt for years to come. 