

GRAHAM AND KEM KREST

Developing Talent and Career Paths in Rural America



CareerWise



A Rural Community

Elkhart County's claim to fame is as the RV capital of the world, with dozens of recreational vehicle companies in the area. Other opportunities exist, but the vast majority of jobs come from support and service to this one industry, with an estimated one in five residents working in RV manufacturing, service, and support. While the industry produces tremendous economic revenue for the area, it can be difficult for young people looking to explore different career paths — and for employers in other segments to attract and cultivate new talent.

Apprenticeship in Elkhart County

Local employer Kem Krest — a company that manages and markets customer-branded parts, chemicals and accessories on behalf of OEMs within the automotive, agricultural, industrial, powersports, and defense industries — had good jobs but not enough people to fill them. They needed to innovate, so the company looked to a youth apprenticeship program coordinated by CareerWise and Horizon Education Alliance (HEA). For Kem Krest, a company committed to making a positive impact in the community, the apprenticeship program not only opened the door to a new talent pipeline, but also gave back to the community in a meaningful way.

Graham, a high-school sophomore at the time, stepped into the opportunity presented by the apprenticeship program immediately after learning about it. “After a jam-packed sophomore year, I learned about a new work-based learning program beginning at my high school. I immediately thought it sounded amazing and jumped right into the application experience — and I am so glad I did. Apprenticeship has opened up so many professional opportunities for me.”

And those opportunities have only multiplied during the two years he's participated in his apprenticeship. Graham has become an integral part of the Kem Krest logistics team, playing a key role in purchasing, procurement, sourcing and metrics, and he is currently growing his experience in project coordination. “I have a stronger resume right now as a high school senior with apprenticeship experience than a lot of seniors in college. I'm doing the job they're just learning about.”

In addition to the career skills he has gained, Graham is also grateful for the mentorship and networking opportunities provided through the program. “After two years in my internship, I am now connected to executives and mentors that can continue to help me shape my career path moving forward,” said Graham.

The Power of Mentorship

One of those powerful mentors has been Graham's supervisor Travis Meyer. "Graham has been an incredible asset to the supply chain team here at Kem Krest," said Travis. "We joke around that he is the Doogie Houser of procurement, because at his young age he has really absorbed an incredible amount of information about the role and the profession. He is working in three different procurement systems, and really understands warehousing, distribution and procurement."

Having a young person on board has benefited the company in some unexpected ways as well. "He has made us better, too. Having an apprentice has allowed me to grow as a supervisor, and it enables us to better understand what we need to hire for as we continue to grow the department." Travis also noted that with Graham on the team, he has been freed up to focus on some of the more strategic areas of his role in procurement, relying on Graham to manage many of the vital daily and weekly functions. "He really fits here and gets the big picture of what our work is about. Kem Krest has invested in Graham, but Graham has made meaningful contributions to Kem Krest, too."

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~ Graham

Speaking A New Language

Graham's family has noticed an incredible transformation over Graham's two-year apprenticeship as well. "This program has matured Graham tremendously," said Graham's mom, Megan. "In many ways it is as if he speaks a new language now — the language of a businessperson, not just a high school student." Just the other day we were driving in the car and Graham told me he needed to take an incoming call — from an executive at Amazon. To have my son, graduating from high school, interacting with executives at Amazon and managing elements of a company's global procurement system, is very impressive."

Graham knows he has matured from his experience as well. "I've definitely improved my time management and professional communications skills; I'm now completely comfortable speaking in front of people in any environment." When Covid forced employees to work from home, Graham also learned how to adapt his professionalism in any setting and manage his work with colleagues remotely.

A New Career Path Illuminated

With his three-year apprenticeship program about to wrap up, Graham is setting his sights on what comes next, and has brought his supervisor, Travis, into that conversation. "I am excited that he's planning to attend Indiana University, which is my alma mater," said Travis with a smile. "This is definitely a mentorship that has brought me tremendous pride and one that will continue. His apprenticeship is concluding, and now he's a skilled worker — exactly what we need. Graham has a job here at Kem Krest at any point in time, including over breaks and in the summer."

For Graham, the three-year apprenticeship has been an invaluable experience, helping to shape his future. "I'm going to obtain my degree in Supply Chain Management with a minor in Marketing," said Graham. "This is a path I might never have explored without my experience with the apprenticeship program and my time at Kem Krest."