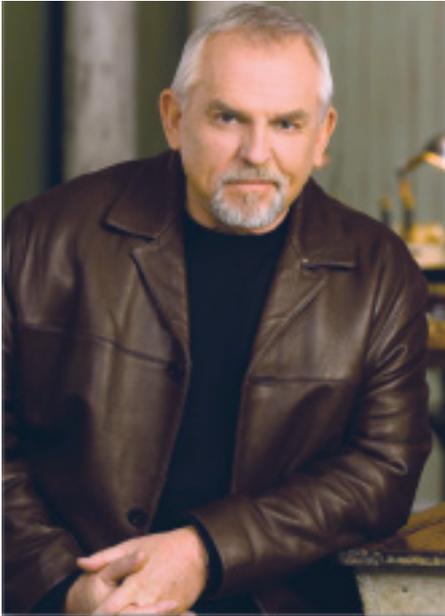


Q&A with John Ratzenberger, Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs

Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO



Through its manufacturing summer camps and scholarships, NBT is inspiring the next generation of manufacturers, welders, plumbers, carpenters and more... one tinkerer at a time. John Ratzenberger, a founder of NBT, speaks on behalf of the organization and how it's addressing the urgent need to engage young people in career preparation for well-paid, fulfilling jobs that require hands-on skills. Ratzenberger is best known for his roles on "Cheers" and "John Ratzenberger's Made in America," and is the only actor to voice a character in every Pixar film.

Can you please give us some background on why you started the NBT organization?

About 2 ½ years ago, I started the Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs foundation based on my discovery that, in America, we're literally running out of skilled workers—people who know how to use tools, and measure, and bend things and mold things. Because of the traveling I did with my show, "John Ratzenberger's Made in America" on The Travel Channel, every time I went to a factory, I discovered that their biggest worry was the fact that we're running out of workers. The average age of a worker is 56 years old, and my biggest question was, how come nobody's doing anything about it? If the average age of a skilled worker is 56, then why aren't we screaming that from the rooftops? Because in six to ten years, when everyone retires, what's going to happen? And everyone seems to have their heads in the sand, even the manufacturers. Everyone seems to be complaining about it, and I needed to have people realize that this is a national problem. It's not just a problem in specific factories... it's not just manufacturing, but it's about infrastructure as well, because we're going to need people who can fix bridges, and elevators, and water systems and electrical systems, turbines, dams that produce electricity... and

no one has been doing anything about it.

So I started NBT to address that situation, and to bring awareness to the problem and get children—and the parents of the children—to let them start building things again: go in the backyard and play in the sandbox, build a tree house ... because it's dangerous to have a civilization where nobody knows how to do anything. Because that's the end; then it's finished. To me, there's no other issue that's bigger than this, because at the end of the day, I don't care what political party you're in, I don't care what your area of expertise or your cause is. If you can't get over a bridge to get from one place to another, or if there's no water coming out of that spigot when you turn on the tap, then your cause is pretty unimportant compared to infrastructure and actually making things, because we won't last as a civilization unless we have the ability to make things. Schools cancelled shop, or industrial arts courses, a long time ago—and many people don't even realize that.



Has the situation with manufacturing—layoffs, plant closures—over the past couple of years been damaging to what you're trying to convey to people?

No. As a matter of fact, I was just at several charity events where different people came up to me and handed me their cards and said "Just let me know how I can help." One person was a big airline executive; their issue is they can't find qualified people to repair the planes. Someone else was in banking, but they realize if manufacturing goes, the banks go. They just won't exist. It's not just a matter of individuals keeping their companies going—that's important—but the big, overall view is that we will not have a country if this problem isn't addressed.

How about from a young person's perspective, when they're looking at mapping out their careers? Do they look at manufacturing and think it's perhaps more unstable than it is?

No. There is actually evidence that more people are going to learn skilled jobs. I don't know where you're sitting right now—it could be a house or an office—but things need repairing. Regardless of the job situation, somebody has to know how to fix it. So if you have those skills, you can go anywhere in the world. You could be a budding brain surgeon, but it would be nice if you had those skills to fix things to get you through school at least.

So what kind of specific initiatives have you been behind in order to further your objectives?

We've set up camps nationwide through the FMA (Fabricators & Manufacturers Association International®). We partnered with the FMA just within the last year and they have really stepped up to the plate as far as running the organization and putting the camps together. It's been a good partnership for us. We did about 20 camps last year. Right now we're working with some community colleges nationwide to develop a program so young people can learn vocational skills much earlier. Personally, working with the Boys and Girls Club, I am talking about putting some vocational training into one of the clubs in Florida, as a test to see how it works, to get the kids back to using their hands.



These kids are different ages. We fund them, and if they want to, they can learn things like metal-working—bending and shaping. We've got 12 year old girls who are using welding torches. It's fun. These kids just love it, because when in their lives would they get to do this? And it doesn't mean they have to do this for the rest of their lives, but it means they know it's there as an option, and they get to know how the real world works in a much bigger way. They understand that someone has got to do this. Someone has to get up in the morning and put a nut and a bolt together—otherwise the rest of us grind to a halt.

So the show got you into this issue, but what got you into the show in the first place? Do you have roots in manufacturing?

I was a journeyman carpenter and a house framer. The town I grew up in was a factory town—Bridgeport, CT. It was probably the biggest manufacturing center in the country, certainly during World War II. I was surrounded by people who worked in factories and they were my first heroes. My mother worked in a factory. My uncles would talk about tolerances of 1/1,000th of an inch like the fate of western civilization depended on it. I realized later on in life that they were absolutely right. The fate of western civilization depends on America's strength; America's strength depends on manufacturing. If we don't have it, then everything just collapses. It's a domino effect.

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How are you getting manufacturers involved? If somebody said, "I want to help," then what is the best way?

They should contact the FMA and let them know that they're offering their help.

Is there anything else you'd like to say to the plant managers you're speaking to?

People just need to realize that this is a bigger issue than they may realize. They are concerned, certainly, for their facility and what they make, but everybody has vendors and other people that are making other parts for whatever they're making. You have to realize that those people are having the same problems, so if those people go out of work because they can't find people to come in and do the job, then so do you—because you're not going to get deliveries of that essential piece that you need for your product. It's a big tapestry, and right now, we're being threatened in more than one way from China, and at some point, there will be a tipping point. We'll find that we have to go back to manufacturing to get us out of the hot water, and manufacturing is not going to be there, only because we had this vision that everybody has got to go to college. Not true—not everybody wants to or needs to go to college. Somebody has got to build that college.

For more information on FMA, visit www.fmanet.org [1].

For more information on The Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs Foundation, visit www.nutsandboltsfoundation.org [2].

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