A few days after his 19th birthday, a USU Eastern welder relaxes in his instructor’s office with a big grin. He describes how as a kid he hated school, yet was just named the top welder in the United States.

It happened last week when Eastern’s Chandler Vincent and welding instructor Mason Winters flew to Huntsville, AL, for the U.S. Open Welding Trials. He had been there in November where the top-six welders were scaled down to three. He had been there in January where the top-three welders practiced with welding experts. And again he went back last week to compete for the top spot.

After four days of nonstop welding, he was named the USA WorldSkills welding champion, a feat never achieved by anyone from USU Eastern.

Winters, a former College of Eastern Utah student, was named the second-best welder in 2009 as was Jeremiah Garcia, who was named second-best welder in 2007. No one had ever been named No. 1 from Eastern until Vincent, a freshman, claimed the prize and will represent the United States in the WorldSkills championships held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in October 2017.

Since fall semester began in August 2016, Vincent welded 10 hours a day, seven days a week. The only time he did not follow his intense regiment is when he took a half day off to spend Christmas morning with his family in Roosevelt, then returned to Price to practice welding that afternoon.

He credits his instructor, Winters, who told him that he would have to yield to this regimented schedule if he wanted to compete with the elite welders in the nation. And he did every day for seven months, including missing every major holiday except a half-day at Christmas.

“Everyone at the competition was insanely talented,” he said. “I am always happy, not stressed out. I adapted to the challenge I had during the competition without stressing out and staying calm. I’m a pretty happy guy and doing something I love.” It just so happens that Vincent is the best in the nation doing something he loves.

Winters and Vincent have more in common other than their love for welding with both being first-generation-college students. They both also hated high school and never thought they would graduate, let alone attend college.

All Vincent wanted to do was hunt and be in the outdoors when he was in high school. He hated school and wanted to drop out. His mother begged him to go to school and take just one class he loved. At 15 years old, he registered for a welding class at the Uintah Basin Applied Technology College and the rest is history. Winter’s story paralleled Vincent’s . . . “I failed every class my sophomore year in high school and then I found welding.”

Both Winters and Vincent attended Eastern’s High School Welding Competition and both won it, thus receiving scholarships to the welding program. With those wins, it put them on the radar by the Eastern instructors to compete, first at the state level, and eventually qualify for the national level. Winters and Vincent both won gold at state and headed to the national welding competition.

The parallelism of the two Uintah Basin natives stops when Vincent did what Winters failed to do . . . bring home the U.S. Welding Trials title. With that title he won a $40,000 scholarship and tools from the American Welding Society.

Reflecting upon the program, Vincent said, “I think welders coming out of this program are way above average on the knowledge and welding techniques. There are definitely top-grade welders coming out of Eastern.” When practicing for the competition, he said he likes to choose projects that he is not good at and perfect them.

Philosophically, he is wise beyond his years. He advises students to, “Push yourself to the limits and soon you will find you have none. I had no purpose for math, no purpose for anything. I was a kid who didn’t want to do anything but go hunting every day of my life, I didn’t care about the
future until I found welding and then I was like, holy crap I am going to need this now."

Vincent cannot say enough good about the welding department at USU Eastern and its instructors. "The biggest thing that I have learned from this program, is learning how to learn. I learn from my own mistakes and better myself from the things that I have screwed up. I thought I was pretty good at welding and thought I knew everything. I came into here and it was a big awakening for me. They [the instructors] opened up this huge world on the theory side and now I understand what is going on in the metal and how the machines get the power."

These instructors definitely teach a one-of-a-kind program. The things students learn will last them a lifetime. I have seen a lot of people in the industry think they know what is going on and there are a lot of problems that can be solved coming out of this program. Besides making great welders, the instructors develop character here", he said.

The best part about the instructors at Eastern are they are top in their field. Winters graduated from CEU and Weber State University, worked as an engineer in California three years before returning to Utah to join the faculty at USU Eastern.

Austin Welch is also an alumni of the Eastern welding program and a Weber welding engineering technology graduate. He was part of a three-person team in the welding fabrication contest that won nationals once in high school and twice for Eastern in 2011-12.

Professor Lon Youngberg, who holds a doctorate, came to Eastern after spending years in the welding industry before coming to Utah to teach.

Vincent also has praise for his teachers outside the welding department. He hopes to earn his associate degree as well as AAS degree in welding, but with all his traveling to the competitions, it has taken a toll on attendance in his classes outside of welding. "Faculty on this campus have been really supportive about it; they know what I am going through. I had a really important math test last week that I missed and the instructor is giving me the time that I need to take it."

Before Vincent earns his degree, his passport will be stamped from Russia, Australia, China as well as Abu Dhabi as he has been invited to compete in their national competitions. In the U.S., he will attend the national SkillsUSA competition in Louisville, Kentucky; practice at the Lincoln Training Center in Cleveland, Ohio;, and spend a week with Ray Connolly, the last American to win gold at the World Skills Championship in 1999, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Connolly was on Eastern's campus for two days a few years ago. He worked with the instructors and students and is familiar with how USU Eastern welding department teaches its students.

Discussing Vincent is easy for his instructors who realize what a big deal it is to have the top welder in the country on their campus. "He is obviously talented, but talent does not get this, a whole lot of work does. We see students with a lot of potential and skills, but putting together skill with desire and opportunity is where Vincent is able to shine and make it work," Youngberg said.

Welch agrees, "A medal on the national scale is amazing. One has to realize that there is not a higher level of competition than Vincent has achieved. This is the pinnacle, there is not a higher sanctioning body than this in the U.S."

"Vincent is an extraordinary young man, a rare combination of raw talent, skill and work ethic, humble, coachable. Sometimes you see people with talent levels that are high, they know how good they are and they are a little bit abrasive to advise. Vincent is exactly the opposite."

As one watches Vincent smile and converse during his interviews, the word humble best describes him. He’s thankful for his family, his instructors, his girlfriend and anyone who has had a positive influence on his life.

His advice to students, "Find your passion. If you find your passion and work hard towards your goals, there is nothing that is impossible."

"I want to let everyone know that there is nothing that you can’t achieve with hard work. There are no limits!"

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