

Robert Pate admits he doesn't know everything when it comes to brakes, transmissions or engines.

But Pate hopes a background that includes time in the Army, a college degree and work in several different fields will help him transition into his new position as automotive instructor at the Lowndes County School District's Career Technology Center.

"Some of the things I did in the past out of necessity," said Pate, a 1993 graduate of New Hope High School. "The one thing I can tell these students is what you think is not always what is going to happen. I thought I was going to retire from the military and do my 20 or 25 years, and that didn't happen."

Pate blew out his knee and had surgery to fuse his ankle together, which earned him a medical discharge from the military. He said that experience helped him learn the importance of having a back-up plan. As a result, Pate's ability to learn multiple skills throughout his life allowed him to assemble a diverse toolbox that has enabled him to change directions and keep going.

"If you learn a skill, nobody can take that away from you," Pate said. "That's why I love the skills area. My son (Bryce) came here and graduated from the welding program in 2022. My son saw me fixing things when I worked at the CMSD schools. He was amazed at how I could do it, and no one can take that away from you."

Pate started in his new position Monday. He replaces Ben Prowell, who resigned Nov. 17, 2023.

Pate worked as a long-term substitute teacher from 2018-2020 and then completed work on his master's degree. Prior to joining the CTC, he worked for three years as a mechanic and served as the transportation director in the Columbus Municipal School District.

“I was ready for a change,” Pate said. “I enjoyed my time at the CMSD, but I was working long hours and I needed a break and something that was a little less stressful.

“It has been different. The students have the willingness to learn and want to get their hands dirty, which is tremendous.”

Pate has three blocks of classes (a class with Level 2 students and two classes with Level 1 students) daily and follows the State of Mississippi’s curriculum for an auto service technician. He said his lessons are a mix of classroom work and hands-on experience in the shop.

“I am showing them videos of how things are done and I am showing them real-world experience and telling them how you really do things,” Pate said.

Pate was a certified diesel engine mechanic in the United States Army (active and reserve and stationed in Kentucky, Maryland, Korea and Texas) for 12 years. Pate also attended Mississippi University for Women, where he earned a degree in business and communications (specializing in broadcasting and journalism). He then worked at FedEx Express for several years and ran his own insurance agency until 2018.

Pate said there is tremendous value in learning skills or trades that are taught at the CTC. He said those skills often can help students land jobs that enable them to make a good living, which is why he is happy to give back to students who are ready to do more than the old-school word working classes.

“This facility shows you can make money and you always will have a job,” Pate said. “There is always going to be electricians, plumbers, carpenters, auto mechanics needed. That is what this area shows. Not everyone needs to go to college. We have hyped on that for so many years, but some people don’t do well with tests and are excellent with

their hands. This is a prime example of how you can be excellent with your hands and make a decent amount of money.”

Susan McClelland, the director of the CTC, said the school district was fortunate to find someone like Pate in the middle of the school year who has the right skills and experience and was interested in pouring that knowledge into students.

“He is kind of being baptized by fire right now trying to figure out all of the digital programs we have and being with the students every day,” McClelland said. “He has been assigned a mentor (Jordan Hawkins) and all of us are checking on him and are here for him if he has questions.

“I hope he will love it and he will want to stay with the program and that he will help grow it and give our students the very best experience we can give them.”