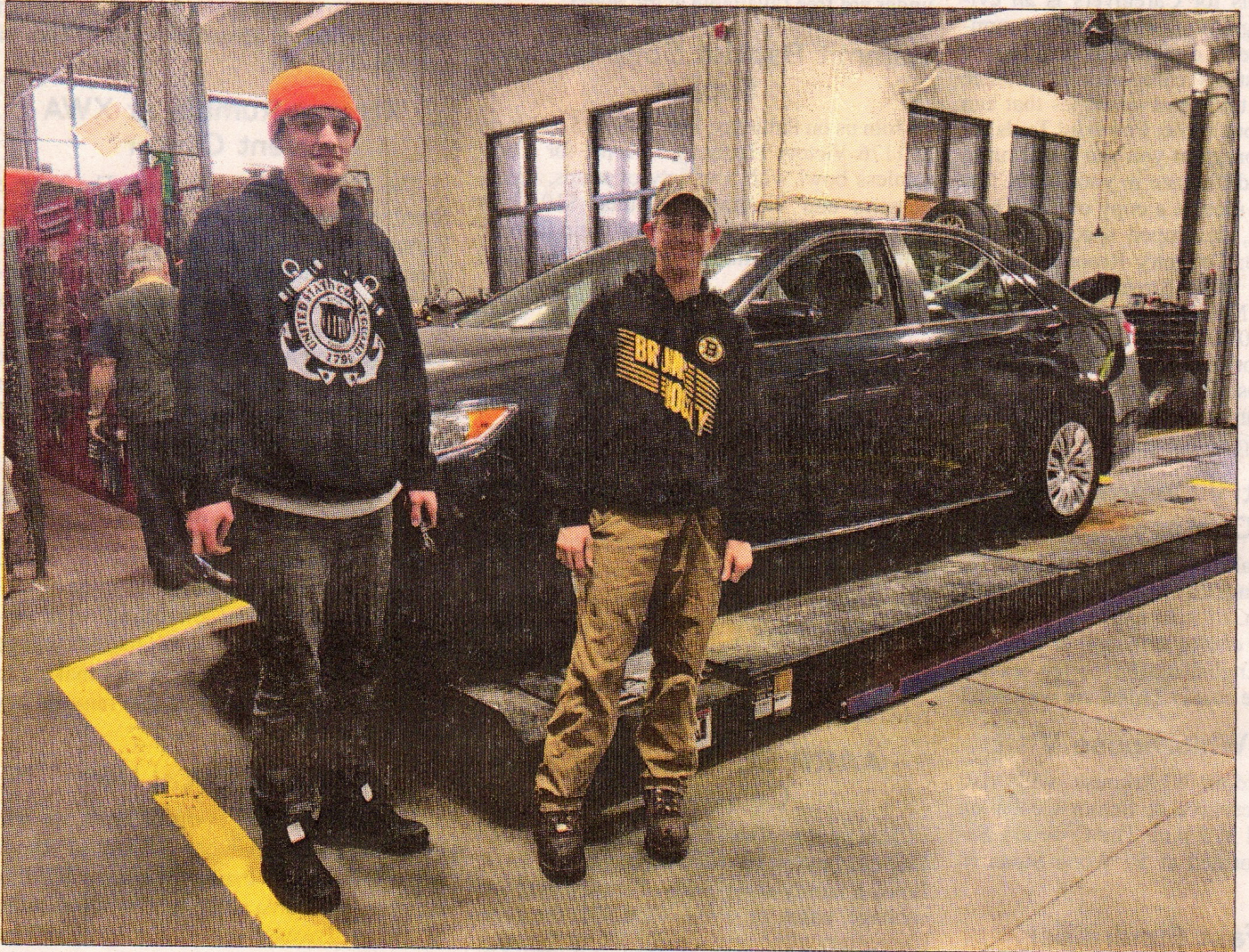


# GIFT OF GEARS



Coventry High School Seniors Gabe Landry (left) and Christian Hopkins (right) stand by with the program's new 2012 Toyota Camry donated by MetLife.

Photo by Kendra Lolio



# MetLife donates car to Coventry High School automotive program

By KENDRA LOLIO

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COVENTRY — Metropolitan Life recently donated a used 2012 Toyota Camry to Coventry High School's Automotive Technology program that has allowed students to sharpen their skills on a newer-model vehicle.

According to CHS Automotive Program Teacher Andrew Wessner, the students are generally used to working on older vehicles, basically whatever is donated to the shop. Their newest car is a 2003, so he wanted to get them working hands on with a vehicle that has some modern technology.

Wessner told the program's advisory board that the students needed newer cars to work on, and Phil Casacalenda, a board member and owner of West Warwick Auto Body on Tiogue Ave, reached out to MetLife to see if they could help.

"It's called 'automotive technology,' but I stress the technology part," said Wessner, who has been teaching the program now for two years. "We need a car with technology in it, so we wanted to see if we could get something donated or buy something cheap. Phil called me said they have a program where they

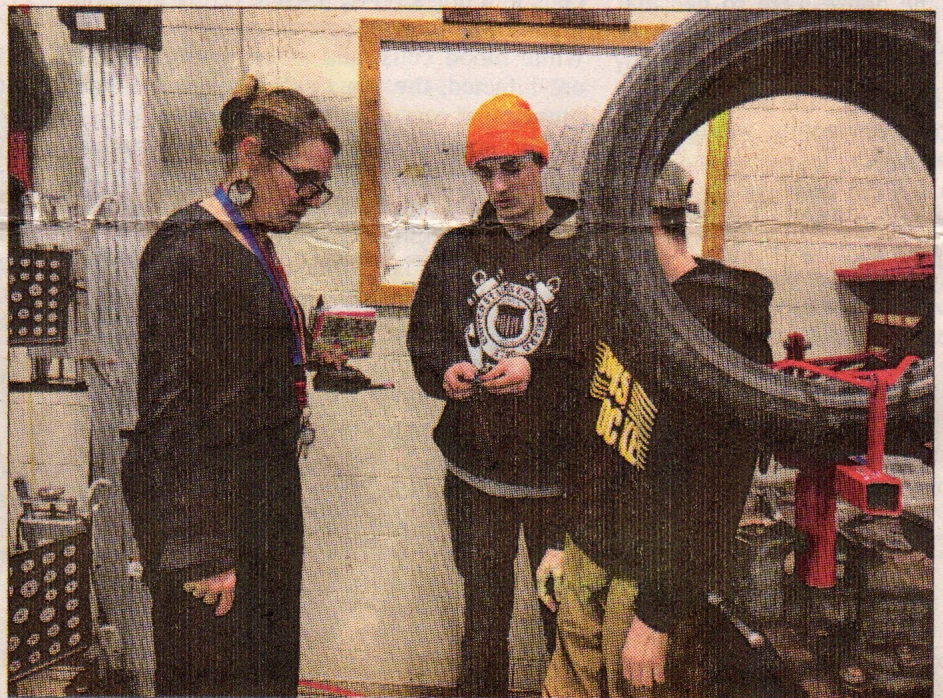


Photo by Kendra Lolio

**CHS CTE Director Lorj Ferguson speaks with Landry and Hopkins as they perform a tire repair.**

donate cars to school systems which was awesome."

The car is technically totaled, but students are able to use it to practice things like oil and brake changes, tire

repair and rotation and multi-point vehicle inspections. They also work on cars belonging to the school's faculty and staff.

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# Auto

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They may need their oil changed or a patch put on their tire - and the students need to learn about fixing cars.

"We've taken this car apart probably 3 to 4 times already," said Wessner of the new (used) Camry. "We've had the doors off, the windows out. It's good practice."

The Camry also has bluetooth capability and navigation.

"So one day I'll have the kids pair their phones and make a phone call to the office," he said.

"I think they'll get that part really fast."

A big part of their training is in electronics, which they start working on in the second of their four years in the program.

Last year's graduates are now working at places like Tire Pro, West Warwick Auto-body, Flood Ford and other local shops. Others have gone into landscaping and construction, and Wessner said the skills they learn are transferrable and useful to other fields and industries.

"We just give the kids opportunities," he said. "It doesn't have to be fixing cars. It could be trucks or heavy equipment, repairing lifts, being a supplier. If you know the automotive end of things you can talk to someone in the shop better. You need the mechanical aptitude to do this stuff."

As seniors they spend about three hours of their school day working in the shop. They're required to pass a written safety exam on a yearly basis.

According to Coventry High School CTE Director Lori Ferguson, the program also

teaches students about having a good work ethic.

"It prepares them for the work place," said Ferguson. "It teaches them to be on time and responsible and work with customers. Even if you're having a bad day you still have to be pleasant. Those are the skills students develop because they are consistently being told they have to practice. Those are just as important as the technical aspects."

Ferguson also said the shop will soon be receiving a donation from the Ryan J. Partridge Foundation, a nonprofit organized in memory of late CHS automotive student Ryan Partridge who died in a car accident in 2013. The organization now helps high school students in vocational fields pursue their careers. A car show is held every year to raise money for the foundation.

The donation will be used to renovate and stock the tool storage area of the shop with new equipment.

Casacalenda of West Warwick Auto Body said he was happy to facilitate the partnership with MetLife.

"They had modern equipment but no modern vehicles," he said of CHS. "We're running out of technicians in the field, so the ones we do have we have to cherish. They need to work on those newer cars. It was very kind of MetLife to make the donation."

Coventry High School now offers a grand total of 15 programs in its Career and Technical Center. Last week the Coventry School Committee approved 4 new pathways for students to choose from, including engineering, biomedical science, sports and physical training and business management and finance. The classes for the new pathways will begin in September.