After Aaron Schweihofer graduated from college in 2007, he began a career teaching industrial education at Grant Community High School in Fox Lake, Illinois. One day, Aaron’s principal asked him to look into updating the curriculum to include an introduction to the field of photonics. While researching photonics, Aaron became very excited about the subject matter, as well as the career opportunities in the field. “Everything I was learning about photonics made me more assured that photonics was the career for me,” he recalls. “I decided to research colleges with two-year degree programs, and was most impressed with Indian Hills Community College (IHCC).” After three years of teaching, he finally took the plunge and enrolled in the Laser and Optics Technology program at IHCC. He couldn’t be happier with his choice—as he says, “Choosing a different career path to obtain an associate of applied science degree in laser and optics technology at IHCC has been the best career decision I have made at this point.”

For Aaron, the most challenging aspects of completing his degree had to do with balancing work and school. To pay the bills, he needed to work three jobs, all while attending school full time. But he kept his goal in mind, and he knew that if he kept pushing forward and managed his time efficiently, his vision would become reality. Today, he recommends that students think about both financial opportunity and personal satisfaction when they’re considering a career:

“I think it’s important that you go for a career that you would enjoy and that pays the bills. I encourage people to look into it and see what types of careers are out there, because there are endless number of careers in photonics. Do your research, and see if photonics is for you.”

After graduating from IHCC in 2012, Aaron began working as a Manufacturing Laser Technician for L-3 Insight Technology, a military contracting company located in New Hampshire. His responsibilities include troubleshooting and testing diode-pumped solid-state laser systems. He also is responsible for cleaning and grading optics, communicating with suppliers, writing work instructions for multiple production lines and training of production personnel, maintaining clean-room protocol, and testing lasers systems at the design level.

Aaron finds working at L-3 Insight Technology rewarding for many reasons. The products he’s helping make have an important purpose: L-3 Insight Technology develops and produces advanced night-vision and electro-optical technology and systems for the United States military. Aaron says, “I know that what I do as laser technician contributes to keeping the men and women of the U.S. military safe, which ultimately protects everyone in the country. That, to me, is gratifying in itself.” He also enjoys the challenging nature of the work. “There is always something new to learn, change, fix, or make better,” he says. “I find it very rewarding to be able to discuss intricacies discovered during product- and process-improvement testing with engineers and then implement changes in production and products.”

“Coming up with processes, testing them, and then implementing the results is really fun. I love what I do!”

Today, Aaron is taking courses in Electronic Engineering Technology while continuing to work as a laser technician at L-3 Insight Technologies. He expects this additional education to offer him even greater success in his field. Electronics, he says, “goes along with photonics, hand-in-hand—you need electronics to run lasers. Continuing my education is crucial to my success in working in the field of photonics.” Aaron has definitely settled into his career as a laser technician, as well as working in New Hampshire. “I like where I’m at,” he says. “This part of the country is beautiful! I just bought a condo and see myself building my career here.”

Aaron earned an associate of applied science degree in laser and optics technology from Indian Hills Community College in 2012. He enjoys playing the guitar, skiing, running, exercising, cooking and spending time with friends and family.