Christopher Loehr didn’t start out with a plan to work in photonics. Right out of high school, he was working a patchwork of part-time jobs to create full-time income. Chris was also enrolled at Wake Technical Community College in a College/University Transfer program, but he had no idea what he wanted to do, and he felt like he was wasting his time. “I wasn’t all that motivated or focused on school,” he recalls, because he couldn’t see where his efforts would lead him.

Things changed for the better after Chris’s mom took a class at Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) as part of continuing education for her job. She picked up a brochure on the Laser and Photonics Technology program while she was on campus and brought it home for Chris. As Chris looked over the brochure, he was very interested in what he saw. He contacted the program director, Professor Gary Beasley, and set up a tour of the facilities. During his tour with Gary, Chris met students who had volunteered to stay after class and demonstrate different laser applications. Chris was intrigued by their enthusiasm for what they were learning. “It kind of impressed me,” he says. “Who wants to stay after class?” Chris remembers that, as these students explained the program and described their classes, their excitement was obvious. By the end of the day, Chris knew he wanted to be a part of that program.

Chris transferred to CCCC and began the fifty-minute commute from his home to the campus—a big change from his previous college, which was just a few minutes from his house. On top of that, Chris continued working full time. “That made it really challenging to find the time to complete homework and just get everything done,” he recalls. In spite of these challenges, Chris found that he was interested in his course material. “That was something I hadn’t found in school before,” he explains. “It really got me interested in learning and furthering my education.” He graduated in May 2015 from Central Carolina Community College with an associate of applied science degree in laser and photonics technology. The program was very hands-on and engaging, and Chris remains impressed by how well-designed the curriculum was.

“I use the knowledge I gained in school….I use something from every single class I took in the program in the work that I do.”

When Chris started out at CCCC, he mostly thought of a college degree as a way to get a better-paying job. But as he continued in the photonics program, he found himself enjoying learning. Now, he says, “I actually have a job I love doing, not just a job to make more money.” Chris is a Slab Fabrication Operator at Northrup Grumman Synoptics. His company grows, shapes, and polishes the crystals used as the active medium in solid-state lasers. Chris works with a variety of production parts to cut the crystals down to size and match them to specifications. Chris works with engineers to help solve problems, do testing, and provide feedback.

“The best part is I learn something new every day. It’s interesting and challenging….It’s something I actually enjoy doing. I never dread going to work.”

Chris sees no downsides to working in photonics—or at Northrup Grumman. “It’s definitely a company and environment that I feel like I can grow in,” he explains.

Chris lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is considering furthering his education with an electrical engineering degree from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Thanks to his degree from CCCC, Chris has a job that will help him pursue this goal; in exchange for a few more years of service, Chris’s company will reimburse the cost of another degree. He hopes to continue working for Northrup Grumman if he gets an electrical engineering degree, and he’s confident he has built a foundation that will enable him to move up in the company.

Christopher Loehr lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. He earned an associate of applied science degree in laser and photonics technology from Central Carolina Community College in May 2015. Chris enjoys snowboarding, hiking, and other outdoor activities.