Matthew Darden
Indian Hills Community College

Matthew Darden was skeptical about photonics, even after hearing great things about the Laser and Optics Technology program at Indian Hills Community College (IHCC) in Ottumwa, Iowa, from his mother's coworker. He didn’t think he could be successful studying photonics, because the little he knew about it made it sound very difficult. But after he visited Indian Hills and talked with Professor Frank Reed, he felt reassured that if he worked hard, he could succeed in the Laser and Optics Technology program.

“Going in,” Matthew says, “you really don’t have a good idea what photonics is.” But once he began to learn about the field, he was surprised to discover how much it interested him. What made the difference, he says, was “understanding how big the field is and how many different jobs I could actually go into....There are so many different fields: research development, metal cutting, military, medical, research.”

By the time Matthew graduated from Indian Hills in 2015, he had received multiple job offers. He appreciated the variety of career options that his degree gave him. “You don’t have to worry about going to school, getting the degree and a job, and then being stuck with it,” he says, “because the field is so big, you can explore.”

“Photonics is such an expanding field. You have the opportunity to really pick and choose what you want, and to me, that is one of the coolest things.”

Matthew decided that he wanted to work in the medical field, and so accepted an offer from Lumenis, a medical laser company, to work in customer service engineering. He is currently training at Lumenis with other technicians. “I work on medical laser equipment, as well as installations for new equipment,” he says. “As a customer service engineer, I have a given territory and am in charge of the systems within it.”

Matthew knows that his work makes a real difference in medical care. He explains, “laser equipment is very important in the medical field today and requires preventative maintenance, as well as corrective maintenance, to keep the systems safe for patients, doctors and staff.” He couldn’t be happier to be working on medical equipment. As he says, “Working and having the satisfaction of being in a field where I know I’m helping people—that’s so rewarding in itself.”

“Seeing videos online of people’s lives changed by Lumenis lasers makes me feel great.”

The work environment at Lumenis adds to Matthew’s satisfaction. “There is a lot of flexibility,” he explains, “especially with our schedules—we make our own and are responsible for managing ourselves. There is trust between the managers and employees. I really enjoy that.”

What does Matthew have to say to students considering a technical degree? “It’s a no brainer. Pursuing a technical degree is a smart decision. Many technical degrees allow you to get a job right out of college and even receive offers before you graduate. I’m twenty years old, and I have a great-paying career. There are a lot of people still going to college at my age for a four-year degree, or they may be a little older and have a four-year degree but are working odd jobs because there is so much competition in the job market.”

Matthew tells prospective students that pursuing a technical degree is not about taking the safe route or choosing something they don’t want to do—instead, students should consider what the best option is for them. But no one should be inhibited by not having prior knowledge in a technical field. What Matthew lacked in experience, he made up for with passion and determination. He believes that anyone can succeed in a technical program, with enough effort and commitment. “As long as you put in the effort and you try,” he says, “you are going to do well.”

Matthew Darden earned an associate of applied science degree in laser and optics technology from Indian Hills Community College in 2015. He is currently focusing on learning his responsibilities as a customer service engineer at Lumenis.