After Ray T. Collins, Jr., graduated from high school, he spent ten years working a string of jobs that he could get with a high school degree, the last of which was working at a factory making PVC pipe. While he was doing this physically demanding work, he decided it was time to get a college degree. He had enjoyed the electronics classes he had taken in high school, and friends who attended Texas State Technical College (TSTC) in Waco, Texas, convinced him to come to the college and learn about its Laser Electro-Optics Technology (LEOT) program. Ray took a tour of TSTC–Waco, talked to a few professors, and, as he says now, “That was the end of it. I was hooked.” The professors he talked to told him which areas of the industry were hiring and what kinds of jobs were available, and it was all very new and exciting to Ray.

Ray found the LEOT program more difficult than he had expected. “It was a lot of brutally long hours, lots of studying, and lots of lab hours,” he recalls. He was also married and working a part-time job and found that his biggest challenge was keeping it all in perspective and balancing his school life with his married life. In 1999, Ray’s hard work paid off, and he graduated from TSTC–Waco with an associate of applied science degree in laser electro-optics technology.

Ray currently works at Sandia National Laboratory, where his title is Principal Laser/Optical Technologist. He maintains, modifies, aligns, takes apart, rebuilds, and uses a three-hundred-joule ruby laser system. “Anything that needs to be done with that [laser], I do it,” he says. Ray loves that technology is always changing and that in photonics, “you’re not bound to just what you learned in school. It’s always evolving.” He finds that the skills he developed at TSTC–Waco have made him a knowledgeable and reliable employee who can handle many different situations. He says “I get satisfaction knowing that I get to directly use my degree, my education, and my experiences to produce an end result.”

Ray’s future is bright, and he was recently promoted to the position of Test Operations Engineer. From there, Ray sees a lot of open doors ahead of him. When asked what he would tell someone considering a career in photonics, Ray says, “It has lots of ups and downs like any job and any career path, but it’s always exciting.”

Ray T. Collins, Jr lives in Edgewood, New Mexico. He graduated from Texas State Technical College in Waco, Texas in 1999 with an associate of applied science degree in laser electro-optics technology. He currently works at Sandia National Laboratory. His favorite pastime is spending time with his wife and daughter.