

2025 Q3

catalyst

BUILDING INVOLVEMENT
A PROFILE ON PATRICK THOMAS





catalyst conversations:

BUILDING INVOLVEMENT

A PROFILE ON PATRICK THOMAS

In 2017, Patrick Thomas volunteered as a mentor for his brother's pre-engineering students at Von Steuben Metro Science Center. For one semester he communicated with students virtually through the Mentor Matching Engine to provide guidance on their class projects. Four years later he rejoined the platform, yet to make the connection that he'd already participated in an Illinois Science and Technology Coalition education program before. Back then it was by chance, but this time he re-entered ISTC's orbit with an intent that has led him to a four-year evolution of involvement.

Patrick has been a Director of Engineering at Milwaukee Tool since 2007. Over time, he's lent his wealth of engineering expertise to the next generation through one-off volunteer opportunities such as judging and speaking at competitions.

His formal introduction to the organization came at the perfect moment, when he was looking to strengthen this involvement. ISTC education programs, specifically the manufacturing industry STEM Challenge, were an opportunity to replace isolated events with continuous, long-term student support.

As a mentor in this iteration of the STEM Challenge, Patrick partnered with student groups at Fenton High School and Charles A. Prosser Career Academy as they created solutions to issues that the modern manufacturing industry faces today.

Transferring his skills as a high-level project manager to mentoring high school students was not only easy, but also rewarding for Patrick.

“I have spent my career in a lot of different factories, and I really love factories because they make stuff. I know that sounds super nerdy, but that's the truth,” he jokes. **“So I try to share some of those experiences and help students break down the process of making something into small steps in order to end up with the result that they want.”**

Patrick sees mentorship not just as an opportunity for students to learn content-based skills but also as a unique support for soft-skill development, which he's observed as a concerning gap among young people entering the workforce. Providing that for his students through day-to-day mentorship was a way to mitigate that gap on an individual scale while fulfilling a longtime passion for high-quality and accessible education.

“I benefitted from the time and effort of adults to provide me with a STEM education when I was a child,” he says. “As I have the time and resources, it only makes sense that I would try to return this to today’s students.”

That same passion is what motivated Patrick to elevate his impact when the opportunity presented itself.

COMBINING EFFORTS

In 2023, ISTC formed an associate board to support its education programs, and Patrick joined as an inaugural member. Working with the associate board called upon his skills as a cross-functional collaborator.

“Inside of my role, I’m very used to working with a lot of different people—not just engineers—to achieve a certain goal. This was kind of like that,” Patrick explains. **“The associate board brought a lot of energy to the cause. A lot of different ideas from different people on different ways to engage and solve problems.”**

As a member of the events committee, Patrick assisted in the planning and execution of fundraising events supporting ISTC’s education programs. This allowed him to continue serving the cause he was dedicated to while creating a new scope of impact. “Talking to kids in a classroom has an immediate effect that benefits those kids, but the associate board built the longevity of the organization as a whole,” he says. The associate board has since expanded into an ambassador program to carry on the work Patrick and the other members started.

That contribution to ISTC’s lifespan has been recently maximized by Patrick’s ascension to the Board of Directors. As a board member, Patrick will now have a voice in conversations that affect organization programming. He intends to use his experience as a mentor in those programs to inform his perspective.



“I credit my participation in the STEM Challenge with my understanding of the programs,” he says. **“If I had not participated and been in the classrooms with students face-to-face, I don’t think I would realize the value that’s being provided in the same way that I do now.”**

STEPPING UP FOR STATEWIDE IMPACT

Beyond the organization, Patrick hopes his new capacity for support will put him in a position to help boost Illinois as a whole. He envisions a thriving state as one home to a large talent base with a strong enough economy to provide jobs to that population and care to those who need it. The goal is to leave the next generation of Illinoisans better off than the one before and achieving that requires an investment in tomorrow’s leaders from today’s.

“In an environment that’s changing like I’ve witnessed in the last 25 years, we will not stay competitive unless we continue to educate the next set of students and guide them so that when we are old, they are being good stewards of society,” Patrick says.

Over his years of involvement with ISTC, Patrick has provided that support on a range of levels and still does. In addition to his service on the board, he plans to continue volunteering. There’s value in effort made on any scale, and Patrick has found a particular affinity for mentorship.

“Being able to meet with students even for just two hours and watch them demonstrate a new observation about the world or make an achievement in their project is fantastically rewarding,” he explains. **“It’s guaranteed to be the best thing to happen each week.”**

Patrick encourages other members of Illinois’ innovation ecosystem to find a method that they’re passionate about in order to give back to the development of the state and its future leaders.

“You can provide a major lift up to someone else with very little effort,” he says. **“And remember that you can contribute in different ways. Figure out what’s valuable to you and demonstrate that value with your actions.”**





ILLINOIS
SCIENCE &
TECHNOLOGY
COALITION

from ideas to impact

catalyst

2025