

By Emily Ford (eford@salisburypost.com)

Rick Wenkel had just returned from three tours of duty in Iraq when he enrolled at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

Originally from St. Louis, Wenkel and his wife settled in Concord after he came home from the war because her family lives in North Carolina.

He entered the radiology technician program at RCCC, but it wasn't a good match.

"It just was not for me," the 31-year-old told the Salisbury Rotary Club Tuesday.

Frustrated and unsure of his future, Wenkel changed his major to biotechnology, a new two-year degree program at RCCC designed to prepare a workforce for the \$1.5 billion N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis.

That turned out to be a fortuitous decision.

Within a few months of taking his first biotech course, Wenkel found a mass on his leg. It was melanoma, an aggressive and deadly form of skin cancer.

A surgeon removed the growth, and Wenkel did not have to undergo further treatment. A short time later, however, he lost an uncle to the same disease.

"He had a spot on his neck, and it was that old school of thought — just wait and see," Wenkel said after his presentation to Rotary. "He waited too long."

Those experiences with cancer during his first semester as a biotech student solidified his decision, Wenkel said.

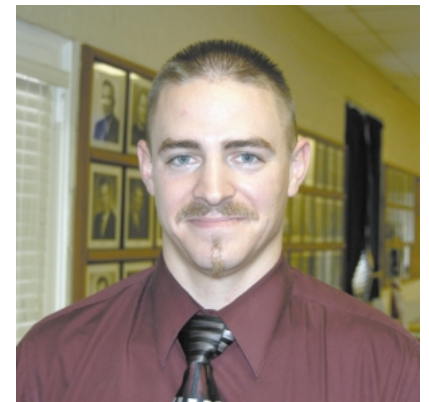
"I knew that I wanted to help find cures," he said.

Maybe even a cure for cancer.

Wenkel and Joseph Ackerman, another RCCC biotech student who spoke to Rotary, both landed internships this year at the Research Campus, a life sciences complex focused on human health, nutrition and agriculture. Dole Food Co. owner and California billionaire David Murdock founded the campus.



Dr. Martha Corjay serves as the new dean of biotechnology, science and math at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.



RCCC biotech student Richard Wenkel has an internship at the N.C. Research Campus.

Wenkel works for the Murdock Research Institute in the proteomics laboratory, helping decipher biological information for Duke University's long-term medical research study. Duke researchers have focused on several chronic diseases, including cancer.

Ackerman, 33, graduated from South Rowan High in 1994. He spent four years in the Navy and returned to Rowan County to work at Draftex and then Philip Morris.

When he learned in 2007 that the Philip Morris plant would close, he and his wife decided not to relocate to Virginia with other employees. Instead, Ackerman enrolled in the biotech program at RCCC.

This year, when he started his internship at the UNC Nutrition Research Institute in Kannapolis, Ackerman said he was contributing to research in the lab after three days of on-the-job training.

"RCCC might not have the prestige yet because it's such a new program, but we are displaying how we can work in the labs and be functional almost immediately," he said. "That's how well this program prepares their students."

Ackerman and Wenkel will graduate this spring, among the first students to earn a biotech degree from RCCC. They both hope to work at the Research Campus and, while they're not guaranteed a job, they said they believe their internships will give them an advantage.

About 100 RCCC students have declared biotech as their major, said Dr. Martha Corjay, the school's new dean of biotech, math and science.

"There is a lot of interest," she said.

Corjay said she enjoys speaking to community groups like Rotary so she can "put a friendly face on science."

During the recession, development has slowed at the Research Campus. Although the loss of major campus tenant Pharmaceutical Product Development Inc. was a blow to morale at the biotech program, the state's commitment to biotechnology is encouraging and "bodes well," Corjay said.

RCCC president Dr. Carol Spalding and Ray Paradowski, chairman of the college's Board of Trustees, are members of the Salisbury Rotary Club.



RCCC biotech student Joseph Ackerman has an internship at the N.C. Research Campus.