FRIB continues progress on $730M facility

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To say Mike VanHouten isn’t afraid of heights would be an understatement.

You can’t be, in his profession.

For the last six months, VanHouten has scaled the ladder of a 150-foot tower crane and gone to work at the construction site of the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, or FRIB — located on campus near the Wharton Center.

VanHouten has been a crane operator for going on 30 years now. It was around that long ago he was first introduced to the business by his father.

“My dad was a crane operator and I learned it from him,” VanHouten said. “We started running small cranes on the ground and graduated into running tower cranes.”

Since then, VanHouten’s work has taken him far and wide, from constructing a children’s hospital in a 280-foot crane in Grand Rapids, to the work he is doing today for FRIB.

Funded by the Department of Energy Office of Science, MSU, and the State of Michigan, FRIB is a $730 million project that will one day play host to the study of rare isotopes.

Rare isotopes are not normally found in nature. Most are forged in spectacular cosmic processes and in rare isotope accelerators — something that would take place within the confines of FRIB.

The construction of FRIB allows scientists to study the physics of nuclei and nuclear astrophysics to advance their knowledge in several vital fields, including medicine, homeland security and industry.

“This project is really interesting,” VanHouten said. “It’s really unique. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

For FRIB Conventional Facilities and Infrastructure Division Director Brad Bull, who’s overseen projects on both the T.B. Simon Power Plant and at Spartan Stadium, has at times been taken aback by some of the things this project requires.

“This project is very heavy,” Bull said. “Some sections have been 14 feet thick of concrete ... It’s thicker and heavier than anything I’ve ever done.”

And if you’re to take a walk through the FRIB construction site, and peer inside the hole where a four-part 220,160-square-foot building will one day stand, keep in mind that nearly every piece of equipment and machinery has been placed there by the 246-foot long beam of a crane which took an estimated seven or eight trucks and two days to erect on sight.

The way in which the construction process with the crane works, says FRIB Project Construction Superintendent Cliff Goodman, is construction team members on the ground will radio in to VanHouten on what needs to be done with the item at the end of the crane. In turn, VanHouten, in a pod 150 feet up in the air, will make adjustments as to what the crew is telling him to do.

For VanHouten, who’s sat atop MSU’s campus from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. for nearly every week-day the past six months, most of the job comes easily to him.

“On the day when there’s no wind, it’s really easy,” VanHouten said of how difficult it is for him to operate a tower crane. “On a windy day, it’s very, very hard.

“It usually doesn’t get scary. As long as everything is working properly, it doesn’t get scary ... For me it’s completely normal because I’m up there everyday. It’s very relaxing and quiet.”

As for the current state of the project, Bull says the construction team is still about eight weeks ahead of schedule, with the completion of the overall project aimed for 2022, and an early completion goal set for some time in 2020.