

BLUE COLLAR WOMEN - THE NEW PIONEERS

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Pioneering is alive and well these days, especially among women who have chosen the satisfactions of accomplishment in traditional blue collar occupations. In 1981, I became the first Journeywoman carpenter in British Columbia...the third in Canada, I was told. That achievement was the result of many years of hard work, and of overcoming the barriers, both internal and external, that limited the perception of what I could learn, what skills I could attain, and what I could accomplish.

Both my father and my grandfather were building contractors, but, as a girl child, the option of considering a career in construction was not open to me. We were not allowed to play around construction, nor ~~were~~ ^{did the society us} allowed to take industrial arts at school. ~~I was~~ encouraged to develop my verbal skills, and ~~was~~ was told my level of mechanical skills would not be particularly useful to me in future. It's a good thing they encouraged my verbal skills: good communication is a must in almost any job you tackle, and a requirement, along with patience, for women entering training or employment in traditionally male-dominated fields.

I worked for many years as a community organizer/educator. ~~I was very~~ ^{but to m/n} involved in the organization and building of the Vallican Whole Community Centre, a community built building ~~that originated~~ ~~with~~ ~~and~~ ~~certified~~ ~~today~~ ~~where~~ I gained my early basic training in the carpentry field. I learned that I really liked working outside, as part of a crew, working together to build something tangible. I learned that the tools felt good in my hands, that I could and did develop the strength necessary to do my job well, and that this added to my sense of well being. Also during this period, due to minimal financial gains as a community organizer, I did all my own tune up and repair work on a series of old Volkswagens. With the assistance of anyone who would answer my questions, and a trustworthy book called Volkswagen Repair for the Complete Idiot, I rebuilt two engines, front ends, a generator, and did regular maintenance and repairs.

~~had~~ ^{After working} ~~worked~~ on the community centre for three years, ~~among other things,~~

when I decided it was time to make a career change, in the direction of creating a long term, financially satisfying, as well as personally satisfying occupation for myself. When I looked around at the possibilities, trades work seemed fairly secure and interesting. Since I had had no exploratory kinds of courses, eg Industrial Arts or pre-trades introductory, the only two ~~which I was familiar with~~ ^{which I was} familiar ~~with~~ were carpentry and auto mechanics. I had gotten my hands greasy and my knuckles scraped enough times to know that I preferred the smell of sawdust ~~and~~ the feel of my hammer and the whir of my power tools to an auto mechanics life. Once that choice was made, ~~came the decision~~ ^{I decided} that if I was going to do it, I was going to do it right, and that meant taking pre-training, ~~and~~ going through an apprenticeship, and becoming a Journeywoman.

Thus began what has ^{been} a long, and sometimes painful, but often very satisfying, pioneering journey. I received very subtle and sometimes more overt discouragement at the hands of vocational and apprenticeship counsellors. Once I made my initial decision to go into carpentry, I also made a commitment that I would give it ~~a~~ solid four years before I would let anything deter me, at the end of which I would be free to make a choice to do whatever I liked. That commitment is what saw me through my apprenticeship.

When I finally did get into training, as the first woman to go through ^{my} trade training course, ~~at Northern Lights College in Dawson Creek~~, life was very difficult. There was no acceptance, little support, and a lot of sexual and gender harassment. Luckily, my feminism and the friends I found directed me to a women's support group that saw me through the whole six months training. I still have a very thankful place in my heart for those women.

On the very first day of school, we were given a math test. I got 58% - 70% was passing. That was one thing I hadn't considered. I was never 'any good' at math.. had barely passed or not passed all the way along in my educational career. But it had never mattered before. When I realized that it could be the only thing that stood between me and success in my chosen field, I went immediately to the

course and taught myself at home in the dormitory every night for three months.

At the end of six months, ~~I got~~ the highest mark in the class on the final exam.

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was my friend.

We take in and understand those things that we see as important to our lives.

I was the pioneer there, and certainly had to carve out a niche for women that didn't previously exist.

Justified

initiated

But I have been told since that the changes I made happen there made it easier for the women who followed.

THEIR

THEIR telling me that made the struggles I went through worth the effort.

One of the aspects of training I chose for myself at that time, besides carpentry and basic math upgrading, was Assertiveness Training. How to be clear, and ask for what you want or say what you don't like, without putting the other person down. That is a bit of a simplification, but the training itself was really an important tool, assisting me throughout my apprenticeship to deal with the attitudes and actions I encountered. Two weekend workshops, put on by continuing education were an invaluable resource throughout the next four and a half years of both on-the-job, and institutional training.

I started out my apprenticeship working for a small non-union company that did Victorian renovation and finish work, ~~and I learned a lot from them. They were very professional and they were very good at their work. They were very good at their work. They were very good at their work.~~

We built some of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. I learned how to make wood as smooth as glass, joined together with invisible lines. I learned to have pride in my work, that I could and did do a good job. I learned to put many different power tools to interesting use. I learned to be a ~~craftsman~~ ^{artisan}, as well as a tradesperson.

Then I decided to join the union. It took six months of talking and waiting and talking some more, and I don't think I ever would have gotten in without the Human Rights Code in the background, a reminder of what was possible. A lawyer friend went over the constitution with a fine tooth comb before she pronounced that there was nothing in there that could keep me out, and she would fight it if we had to.

But when it came down to the line, they made the decision in my favor. Imagine my surprise when they welcomed me as the first woman in the ¹⁹⁴⁸ B.C. Provincial Council of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. ^{construction division of the}

*1 - The first thing was to have the sign on the only sanitary facilities around changed from Gentlemen to Washroom; small things sometimes mean alot. I had to put up with alot of harassment, til I decided that the administration had a responsibility to ensure a supportive and conducive learning environment to all their students. So I spoke up, and was amazed when they responded by telling all the students in the school that their behavior was not acceptable , and if it continued they would be thown out of school and would not get an apprenticeship anywhere in B.C. Overt harassment stopped immediately, and I felt better than I had in four months. Yes, I had put up with it for four months, erasing the pictures and taking down the signs, until I realized how important it was to have a support system of some kind while 'bearding the lions in their den.' That was the hardest part of my journey, learning the lessons of standing up for myself, asking for assistance when necessary, standing alone sometimes, and finding support among women and men who believed in what I was doing. That six months was ~~some~~ of the hardest time in my life,

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photographic

During the course of my apprenticeship, and after becoming a Journeywoman, I have worked as a part of a crew, renovating homes and stores, building hospitals, a mall, housing for seniors, single family dwellings, coal silos 278' tall in the East Kootenays, and fine furniture. Though the ^{initial} expectation ^{of my brothers} is often that I will fail, or at least fail to carry my own weight, after the first week or two on each job, after the early testing period where I must prove my ability to do the job, ^{the pay is excellent - 19/hr} the acceptance and camaraderie is real and extremely enjoyable. Through all of this, I learned the fine lines between bantering and harassment, which are different in every situation, and for every person. In construction, we have to be able to "take it" and "give it back" with the best of them, and assertiveness comes in very handy here. But you know when it has gone too far, when you get that tight feeling in the pit of your chest. Then it's time to be very clear and forthright, telling them that ^{what they are doing is} ~~is~~ not acceptable. ~~Sometimes I use their style of language, and sometimes I use my own, but I have learned how to get my message across.~~ Sometimes I use their style of language, and sometimes I use my own, but I have learned how to get my message across.

Building physical strength and endurance has been both ^{one of the} ~~one of the~~ benefits and requirements for working on construction. Anyone who hasn't worked in awhile has to build up to their best on a new job. I am 5'1" tall, and I have never been in a situation where I couldn't do my job, or hold up my end of whatever there was. People are now learning that no job is worth a broken back. It has been a expensive lesson for a large number of construction workers, but teamwork is the name of the game.

If I were making recommendations to young women who are considering ^{the satisfaction of} ~~work in~~ trades or technology, I would encourage you to keep your math and science options open. Perhaps if Lifeskills included home and industrial arts for all students, you would find applied uses for it early enough to make a difference. I would highly recommend Assertiveness Training courses; it never hurts to be able to ask for what you want, or let people know what you think and feel. I sure wish they would stop calling it nontraditional, women have been building things in this country since the pioneering days and before. I will always treasure my great ^{who said,} ~~uncle,~~ after seeing the photographs of my work, ^{can't say} "Why, you are carrying on the the family tradition!!"