

news

Building careers for women

by Emily Garland

As the landlord's daughter, Melina Harris grew up fixing apartments. So it seemed perfectly natural to go into construction.

Harris, 42, took her first official construction job at age 21.

Since then, Harris has held a variety of building jobs. She is currently a finish carpenter, which means she installs cabinets, molding and other final touches.

Harris loves her job. She just wishes more women would join her in the building trades.

"It seemed perfectly normal to me ... but it doesn't seem perfectly normal to a lot of young ladies in school," Harris says of her decision to enter the construction industry.

Harris wants women's hesitation to join the building trades to disappear. That's why she helped form Sisters in the Building Trades.

The South King County nonprofit is a network of women aiming to increase the number and retention of tradeswomen. The Sisters meet every other month to hear guest speakers, network and share experiences. They recruit and offer mentorship to women looking to enter building trades. Sisters in the Building Trades performs community service for organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. The Sisters also has a ramp-building program.

The Sisters hand out a lot of business cards and hard-hat stickers. Many also teach apprenticeship programs.

Cindy Gaudio is an instructor at a four-year union carpentry apprenticeship taught at Renton Technical College in the Renton Highlands. Out of 400 students, only 30 are women.

Although the number of women in construction has grown since Gaudio entered the field 26 years ago, she would like to see more.

"We would like to see our numbers come up — I would like to see more women," says Gaudio, 47, a North Bend resident and Sisters member. "I think women must be afraid of men, or they think it's bigger than it is. We have cranes do the heavy lifting. I just think it's a great field for women to get into, I really do."

Terry Tilton has been with Sisters in the Building Trades since it was an informal group of 12 to 15 women. Harris helped certify the Sisters as a nonprofit a couple years later, in January 2006. Current membership is 133.

"It's an organization that has been developed by tradeswomen to mentor the next generation of

tradeswomen,” says Sisters board member Tilton. “That is the primary mission, to mentor apprentices. We want to be there to support them as well as to raise apprentices in the building trades and help young women find careers.”

The building trades include everything from asbestos workers to bricklayers, carpenters, cement masons, electricians, plumbers, roofers and teamsters (truck drivers).

Previously a crane and heavy equipment operator, the 50-something Tilton, who lives in Pierce County, works for the Washington State Building & Construction Trades Council.

“Women have been in the building trades for many years,” Tilton says. “Many aunts and grandmothers were Rosie the Riveters. I think in the last 30 years women have been returning and breaking ground.”

Still, Tilton says, “There’s just a huge need out there to attract women to the building trades.”

Harris agrees.

“In the ‘70s there were just as many women going into the trades as now,” she says. “And there’s only 2 to 3 percent coming out, which is about the same as it was in the 1970s. Those aren’t good numbers. They really haven’t changed since the ‘70s, and it’s 2007.”

Harris says women were encouraged to become doctors and lawyers, but not construction workers.

“A lot of people put a lot of effort into changing the public perception about what’s OK for women, but that didn’t happen (in construction). Part of our organization’s aim is to change public perception.”

When she tells people she’s in construction, Harris says they assume she doesn’t do manual labor.

“Today I’m down at Target and they say, ‘Oh, you do construction? Do you hold the flag?’ That’s all they’ve ever heard. I say, ‘I’m a carpenter and I need a new work shirt.’ They’ve never heard of it, so how can they dream about being that?”

Earlier this week Harris handed out business cards to a woman helping her buy blush and another handling grocery carts at Fred Meyer. The woman in the makeup department already e-mailed her questions.

“She may go into a painters union,” Harris says. “It’s a good trade, and she’s fairly small, but being a painter, it won’t matter.”

A big bonus about construction jobs is the good, equal pay, Harris says. She makes \$32.40 an hour, and says that’s typical for most trades.

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