



Building the workforce

BY EMILY SENGER

Women are making strides in the construction industry, but there is still a long way to go before women make major inroads on job sites

In high school, numbers were Julia Penner's nemesis. She struggled to earn the math credits to graduate. While Penner spent many lunch hours sitting inside, doing extra work on math homework, she did look forward to one part of high school: welding class.

In fact, the welding class that Penner loved launched the farm girl from Stettler into a 15-year career in the trades. Now, at age 32, Penner worked as a journeyman welder for 12 years, earned her pressure ticket, owns a home, and, two years ago, she took a position as a trades consultant with the Alberta government.

When Penner looks back she's happy with her career decision, even if it comes with the occasional burn. "To me, it was just the best opportunity," she says. "If I could go back and do it all again, I would not change a thing."

Penner's decision to enter a career in the trades led to a job she loves and a comfortable financial situation, but she is in the minority. While women are gaining ground in other traditionally male-dominated fields, they remain under-represented in construction trades. In 2008, the Alberta government had more than 70,000 registered apprentices. Of those, just 5,745 were women. Attracting more women into trades is recognized as an important step to meeting future labour force demands and women are showing increased interest in careers in the trades; on these points, trade schools, government, industry and non-profit organizations agree. But there is another consensus too: there is still a long way to go.

"I really encourage women to get a trade because it makes you self-sufficient."

**Julia Penner,
journeyman welder**



TRADING INFORMATION: Welder Julia Penner (right) speaks with a high school student at the 2009 GETT conference.

At SAIT in Calgary, the number of women enrolled in programs in the School of Construction has increased since dean Larry Rosia took the helm 10 years ago. Rosia says he is encouraged by an increasing openness in construction. He says new technologies also help make construction careers more appealing, and available, to a wider range of women. "The first thing that comes to mind is some of the physical work might be restrictive to women but it's certainly not," Rosia says. "With the technology that we have today, and the machinery, that is no longer a factor."

In 2000, when Rosia began at SAIT, there were about 280 women enrolled in programs at the school. Today, there are closer to 500. Still, women represented less than nine per cent of the 5,872 students in 2009. The gender split at NAIT in Edmonton is similar. In 2008, 13,028 students enrolled in apprenticeship programs at NAIT. Of those, 917 were female – about seven per cent.

In the SAIT School of Construction, female instructors in the plumbing, architecture, heating ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC), and painting and decorating classes at the school provide compelling role models. Still, Rosia says, there is a long way to go to attract more female high school students to choose construction trades. "There's still the stigma of parents saying, 'I want my daughter to go off to university, or take more traditional-type programming and occupations,'" says Rosia.

At least one Alberta program is working with young women in high school to challenge this stigma. The annual Girls Exploring Technology and Trades conference (GETT),

now in its ninth year, will host about 190 girls in Edmonton this May as part of the annual Skills Canada Alberta competition, which aims to promote technical and trade careers to Alberta youth.

An important part of the GETT conference is a roundtable session, where high school girls talk to women who work in the trades. One of the most frequently asked questions Skills Canada Alberta communications coordinator Shawna Bourke overhears the girls ask: "How much do you make?" Once the important questions are out of the way, participants try their hand at trades like welding, or a female mechanic might teach the young women how to change a tire. "It creates this opportunity for girls to think, 'if she can do that, I can do that, too,'" Bourke says. "And that's the whole idea. It's for girls to consider that their options aren't limited, they're unlimited."

Penner was a speaker at last year's GETT conference. She promotes trade careers as a way for young women to gain financial independence, like she did. "I really encourage women to get a trade because it makes you self-sufficient," she says.

One Alberta charity was founded on just what Penner talks about: using trades as a gateway to financial independence. In Edmonton, Women Building Futures provides women with a 17-week pre-trade training course, which prepares them to enter an apprenticeship.

"The reality is that a lot of women in Alberta, and across Canada, work full time and earn below the poverty line," says Women Building Futures president and CEO JudyLynn Archer. "That's because a lot of

them work in retail and food service. They're working hard. They're working over 30 hours a week and they still have to access the food bank to have something for the kids to eat." About half the women who come through the program have kids. Most are single parents. Women Building Futures provides affordable housing for students who need it and for their children, too, eliminating the financial barriers that prevent many women from seeking training or switching careers.

Paul Verhesen, president of Clark Builders, is a director on the Women Building Futures board. He's been involved with the organization for five years, since Clark Builders renovated an old warehouse in downtown Edmonton, transforming it into the Women Building Futures campus. Clark Builders has also hired many Women Building Futures grads as apprentices, with great success.

When Verhesen first started working with Women Building Futures, the Alberta economy was red hot. "At the time, when Alberta was booming, we were looking for all labour sources from all labour pools and women in our industry was a natural fit," he says. "Typically, the hurdle has been training and just believing in them that they can do the job. That's where Women Building Futures comes in."

As the economy picks up, Verhesen believes a similar skilled labour shortage is on the horizon in Alberta. Both industry and government will need to step up to get more women into the construction labour force. "We've got some momentum going now, but could it be better? Yes," Verhesen says. "Could industry do a better job? Absolutely. Could government do a better job of supporting Women Building Futures, and others non-profits? Absolutely."

Verhesen's call for the government and industry to do more has been answered, at least partially. In March, Lynne Yelich, federal Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification, announced a \$267,500 investment in Women Building Futures. Industry also chipped in, reaching a total \$512,000 investment. The money will be used to finish classrooms, to purchase new software to manage client relationships, and for video conference technology to reach women in rural areas.

Backed by investments like this, Archer

hopes to get more women to consider trades, but to be realistic about it, too, and to make sure that they do some research before plunging in. "It's a tough road," she says. "It's not for everybody." She also hopes to reach industry members who will need to look for non-traditional labour sources as the economy picks back up and baby boomers retire in the coming years. "We really encourage construction companies to consider hiring our graduates," she says. "I know they won't be disappointed." 

Women Build

Don't fear the hammer: It was the lesson many women learned during a unique construction project sponsored by PCL.

In 2006, the company sponsored the Edmonton Women Build Habitat for Humanity project. The goal: complete a 2,200-square-foot duplex in Edmonton for two families in 3.5 months, on time and on budget, using women volunteers as labour.

PCL donated expertise – a female project manager and a female carpenter apprentice – to teach volunteers basic construction skills. That project manager was PCL employee Karla Horcica. "Part of the intent of the program was to teach women building skills," says Horcica, who is currently a PCL construction co-ordinator.

Horcica, a civil engineer by training, managed volunteer builders and sub-contractors daily during Women Build. She also brushed up on her own skills. "How am I supposed to teach these women to use a skill saw when I don't know how to use a skill saw?" she recalls. "A lot of the stuff, I'd never done before."

The project is part of PCL's commitment to encouraging women in construction trades. The company hires graduates from the Women Building Futures program, which provides women with pre-apprenticeship training. It also sponsors 16 scholarships at NAIT, worth \$2,000 each. This year, five recipients were women.



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