

# Women trade in office jobs for construction

## The lure of making things has drawn more women to the construction trades

BY DEREK SANKEY, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JUNE 20, 2009

Soon after Kathleen Greenan graduated from art school majoring in sculpture, she started receiving commissions to create two- and even three-storey structures.

She loved being in demand. But there was an important element missing from her education.

"I knew how to make art," she says, "but I didn't know how to build. It had no structural integrity."

To remedy this, Greenan decided to learn carpentry by enrolling in the trades program at Calgary's SAIT Polytechnic.

"I took this course and fell in love with carpentry instead of art," she says. Four years later, she had her journeyman certification. Since then, Greenan has made it one of her goals to encourage more women to get into the trades.

"Women were stuck in dead-end jobs . . . constantly getting into (work) relationships that weren't necessarily healthy, but it paid the bills," she says. "My goal was to go and help educate them, help develop their skills."

She came across an organization called the Vermilion/YWCA Skills Training Centre. A partnership of Vermilion Energy Trust and the YWCA of Calgary, the centre trains women in the basics of carpentry, dry walling, painting and tiling; many of the students receive federal and provincial funding.

The women earn about \$12 an hour as a living wage while taking the course, which is open to anyone once they go through an assessment and screening process. It's seen as one solution to what is expected to be a serious shortage of trades workers. Statistics Canada data forecasts Canada will need about one million skilled tradespeople in the next 10 years.

People like Jill Martin could help ease that shortage. She initially went to university to become a teacher, but after a few years in that occupation, she decided to go in another direction entirely and enrolled in a trades program at SAIT Polytechnic. She became a tile setter, moved into estimating, and is now pursuing a career in construction management by returning to school to specialize in that area. Martin also wants to help more women trade in their high heels for work boots.

The 27-year-old now teaches part-time at the Vermilion/YWCA Skills Training Centre, blending her teaching background with her technical trades knowledge.

"What it does is it gives women the opportunity to get skills in a trade and eliminate the cycle of

poverty," says Martin.

Across Canada, from BCIT to the Burlington Centre for Skills Development and Training and beyond, trades programs have begun to advertise heavily to women and are tailoring countless programs to them.

The YWCA is active in many communities, partnering with local training centres to dispel the notion that women can't work in the trades.

Greenan says some barriers still exist, but she and others are working to remove them.

"A woman will always have to prove herself on every job," she says. "If you move to another job with a different crew, you will have to prove yourself again, whereas with a guy he just kind of carries it in his back pocket."

That shouldn't stop women from forging careers in the trades, though.

"If you know how to do your work, you can get past most of that stuff," says Greenan.

Tamara Pongracz is the chief instructor at BCIT's Trades Discovery for Women program and says that although women represent about 50 per cent of the population, the message about opportunities in the trades doesn't always reach them.

"Information about training options hasn't filtered through," says Pongracz.

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