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Women's Work: Pioneering Females are Making Their Mark in the Trades

Glen Leyden, The Star
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Bouncing from job to job, Stephannie DuBose could feel her life slipping away.

The Thornton Township High School graduate had dropped out of the University of Chicago, where she was a pre-law student on full scholarship.

"I asked myself, 'Am I here because people told me this is what I'm supposed to do or because it really is what I want to do,'" DuBose said.

Unsure of what she wanted to do with her life, DuBose took temporary work in customer service, telemarketing and computers.

She drifted, trying to find her niche, but nothing seemed to fit. She earned little money, and the work was boring.

Her mom told her to go back to school. Friends suggested jobs she knew she would hate.

"I felt like I was spinning my wheels," she said.

Then one day she passed a billboard that changed her life.

It read, "Learn a job for free."

Guy stuff

Women aren't supposed to be carpenters. They don't make good plumbers or electricians. Construction is a man's job.

At least that's what a lot of us are taught as children. Boys get the toy trucks and hammers. Girls get dolls and Easy Bake Ovens.

"For a lot of women, these jobs aren't an option. They grow up thinking it's not something for girls to do. They think it's guy stuff," said Jane Halpert, DePaul University professor of psychology.

The problem is that many of the "female jobs" don't pay well. A woman working in day care can expect to make about \$8 an hour. Journey-level carpenters make \$31 an hour.

Despite the pay difference, women account for less than 3 percent of high-skilled trade jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

There are a lot of reasons women avoid trade jobs, including a lack of career awareness, mentors and training aimed toward women.

Plus, it's tough being a pioneer. Women aren't always accepted by their male peers, and it's hard working in a field made up of 97 percent men.

"Because these are male dominated fields, many women feel, and for good reason, that they are unwelcome," Halpert said.

Some are ignored or harassed. Others find it hard to get the apprenticeships needed to land the high-paying gigs.

It's a "vicious circle" that needs to change, Halpert said.

"But it's going to take time and experience and a lot of education," she said.

"I used to be prissy"

Reading the billboard, DuBose asked herself, "Why not me?"

Why couldn't she be a carpenter? In high school she helped build the sets for the school plays. Her teacher told her she had a knack for working with tools.

She liked it, too. She liked the sounds and smells of working with wood. She liked that she could look around after a long day and see the work she accomplished.

It was a long way from pre-law classes at University of Chicago, but journeyman carpenters make good money, too.

Not that it would be easy. She didn't have any female friends in construction. She didn't own tools or even a pair of jeans.

"I used to be prissy. I never had a pair of jeans until I got into this field," she said with a laugh. "Now I can't imagine my life without jeans, they're so comfortable."

Many women are afraid to learn a trade because they think it's too much physical work or they won't be accepted by the men, she said. The fear is enough to keep most women standing on the outside.

"Every human being has a need to be loved and accepted," she said. "There is fear of entering a career where it is known women are not wanted or accepted all the time.

"Then there is the fear that, 'I'm just a girl. I can't do that.' Well, it's really not that hard," she said.

Never one to back down from a challenge or quit because her family and friends told her she couldn't do it, DuBose called the number on the billboard.

"My mom wasn't too happy but I told her I had to follow my heart," she said. "It changed my life."

Empowering women

In the early 1960s, newspapers had one listing for male jobs and a separate listing for female jobs. Women didn't bother applying for the male jobs.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 changed the laws, but stereotypes linger.

"It's clearly better than it was 30 years ago, but it's moving very slowly," Halpert said.

Chicago Women in Trades wants to speed up the process.

Knowing that women often must work harder and more efficiently than their male coworkers to gain acceptance, the organization concentrates on providing women with access to tools and training.

In the next decade, the organization expects 38,000 new construction jobs in northeastern Illinois.

"We want the training in place so women are prepared," Susan Donovan of Chicago Women in Trades said.

The U.S. Department of Labor recently awarded Chicago Women in Trades a \$2.1 million grant to help train women for high-paying trade jobs.

While men often have friends and family members in the trade business, women often must go it alone, Donovan said. Chicago Women in Trades can be their guide.

"Boys often benefit from a support system. We try to do that for the girls," Donovan said.

The organization's Technical Opportunities Program gives women the hands-on training they need to excel.

The program has a 70 percent placement rate. Last year, 91 women from the program were accepted into apprenticeships.

Women skilled in a trade make more money, receive better benefits and report more sense of self-worth.

"These are empowering skills," Donovan said. "These women are learning to do something as tradeswomen that can help themselves and their families."

Making something out of nothing

Ten years after she read the billboard, DuBose is being paid well to do work she loves.

She loves the challenge. She loves working with her hands. She loves the sense of accomplishment.

"When you go into an empty room with just the tools in your hands and you leave and there's drywall — you're making something out of nothing," she said.

"Everyone strives to leave their mark on the world. A carpenter does that every day."

DuBose has worked on Millennium Park, McCormick Place and Cook County Hospital. She installs sound-proof windows on homes near O'Hare Airport.

It's good work. The men judge her on her productivity, not her gender.

"Those are the best jobs," she said.

She has had her share of bad jobs, too.

Men can get away with slacking off. A woman can't. Every day she must prove herself, she said.

It doesn't get the optimistic DuBose down, though.

"Because they hold me to higher standards, it makes me a better carpenter than they are," she said.

She has had jobs where no one talked to her. She got used to eating lunch by herself.

Her first foreman gig was a success. Her company gave her a pat on the back, then she learned she had been shorted 50 cents per hour.

She and her union fought "tooth and nail" for the money. It was a matter of pride, not money, she said.

After much wrangling, the company paid her the money she had earned.

Then they laid her off.

"But I always say you get what you put out there. I'm still working, and that company is bankrupt today," she said.

DuBose credits her mother for her positive attitude.

"My mother always taught me that you can be whatever you want to be. There are no limits, keep truckin' and you will achieve it," she said.

Just one of the guys

Amy Moses, 31, says she can count on one hand the number of women she has worked with during her 10-year carpentry career. None of them are still in the business.

Before enrolling in a 12-week training program, Moses did secretarial work.

But she hated working in an office. She knew from an early age that she wanted to work with her hands.

"I wasn't playing with Barbies growing up," she said. "I was playing with blocks and Lincoln Logs."

The Steger woman now works as a foreman. Some days she has as many as 35 men working underneath her.

"I like being in charge," Moses said. "I like the pressure and the deadlines. I like that I'm the one who makes the decisions."

She makes about \$1,100 a week after taxes. That's more than twice as much as she made as a secretary.

"I'm not hurting for money, and my kids are spoiled," she said, adding that she has never been laid off.

She has never had a problem with harassment, either. Her work has earned her co-workers' respect, she said.

"When I'm at home, I can be a woman," she said. "When I'm at work, I'm just one of the guys."

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