



Spotlight on Opportunity Award Winners

Program Participant Achievement Award **Tamara Grant, NEW**

Tamara Grant, 38, has gone from being a single welfare mom to supporting her family as a plumber with the help of Nontraditional Employment for Women. After dropping out of high school after 10th grade, Grant obtained her GED and soon got pregnant. She married and moved from Harlem, where she was raised, to Atlanta. At 28, with two daughters, she divorced. From a second relationship, she had two more daughters. She decided to change her life, and returned to New York where she and her daughters moved in with her father, a former addict and retired construction worker.

In 2002, when she was 32, her hairdresser gave her a flyer telling her about NEW's pre-apprenticeship training program, which serves a number of low-income minority women who are on public assistance and unemployment and often single heads of households with housing issues. NEW trains women for skilled, unionized jobs in the trades with starting wages that average \$15 per hour plus benefits, and that offer career ladders to higher employment.

Grant quickly signed up for NEW's program. It consists of a comprehensive curriculum developed with union apprenticeship directors and employers and teaches skills in basic carpentry, lifting and carrying and math. It also provides life skills training, such as managing finances, dealing with sexual harassment, and networking.

Being back in the classroom was not easy for Grant at first. "I'd been out of school for awhile," she says. "I felt like I had attention deficit syndrome. I had to train myself to sit." In high school she had loved math and had thought of becoming a CPA. "Instead I got married and gave up my career path. I thought I would have a picket fence. I did get the 3.5 kids, but not the picket fence," she says smiling.

Before she graduated from NEW's program in April, 2003, Grant had gained custody of her two oldest daughters. She was also helping her classmates with their math, thanks to tips her father learned on his own job and shared with her. "My dad taught me tricks on how to remember the formulas and I taught my classmates. Trust me, everything in plumbing is math," she says.

Getting her first job took persistence. As a first step in joining Plumbers Local Union No. 1, she and ten of her sister NEW graduates waited on line in the rain all one weekend from 6 p.m. Friday until 9 a.m. Monday. She put her name in the application box as soon as the door finally opened and she was quickly called in for an interview. By July, 2004 she became a union member and began to give back to NEW, mentoring students, attending events and participating with activities for graduates, particularly her classmates. "I tell the students to take advantage of the chance to learn and to make the most of the math class," she says.

After joining the NEW program, Grant regained custody of her two oldest daughters. They were living with her father when their house burned down one Sunday morning, destroying everything they had. NEW stepped in with the help of the Robin Hood Foundation and held a clothing drive for them as well providing Grant with a certificate to buy work clothes. NEW's social worker Linda Young also helped Grant find permanent and safe housing.

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Last fall she completed her apprenticeship, which included academic training and at least 1,500 hours on the job. She worked for Almar Plumbing where for thirteen months she worked building the new Yankee Stadium.

She got her daughters up at 5 a.m. to take them to a babysitter's house or school so she herself could get to work on time. "The good thing was I got off work at 2:30 in the afternoon and was there when they came home from school," she says. She was at the point of earning \$47.66 an hour plus benefits before the economic downturn caught up with her last August and she was laid off. "It's a hard time everywhere, so I'm not pulling my hair out," she says, and she is looking for work.

She likes her trade and is proud of her work. She says, "The best thing about being a plumber is the knowledge. There's so much to learn. Now we're in the age of green and they are recycling. It's a never-ending process of learning new things."

For more on NEW go to <http://www.new-nyc.org>