

June 9, 2008

HAMMER TIME: ONCE SHUT OUT, WOMEN BUILD A GROWING NICHE IN THE CONSTRUCTION TRADES



BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY: Carpenter Doniesea D'Andrade on the job at the Queens West condo development in Long Island City

BY CATHERINE CURAN

June 9, 2008-- IT'S 9 a.m. in the lobby of a Midtown office building, and Marge Keller steps onto the elevator to start her workday.

That's right, onto the elevator - not into it.



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Clad in work boots, black jeans and a black Dickies work shirt, a slender gold hoop glinting in one ear, Keller moves carefully. Nimble footwork is needed to navigate the mass of gears, controls and cables atop the elevator car. Slipping or stumbling while a second elevator operates just a few feet away in the same shaft could prove fatal.

Keller and her partner will spend the next several hours cleaning the elevator shaft by hand, removing grime that could pose a fire hazard. Some days she finishes blackened with muck.

Yet Keller loves working in a traditionally male-dominated trade. In this arena, a woman without a college degree can forge a challenging, high-paying career path, complete with union benefits and free of desk-jockey drudgery. Since Keller swapped \$7-an-hour toil in a Rochester restaurant to train at the local nonprofit Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), she's developed in-demand expertise that's earned her \$30-an-hour pay and a route of her own with 80 elevator cars.

"I'd never really worked with tools besides kitchen utensils," says Keller, 46. "It's a fusion of mechanical and electrical skills - and you can make good money."

Keller is part of a growing number of New York women who are lacing up their work boots and donning the hard hats of male-dominated trades, in the wake of a push by [Mayor Bloomberg](#) to expand women's anemic share of the city's \$26 billion-a-year construction industry.

Working with union officials, developers and NEW, Bloomberg founded a Commission on Construction Opportunity and crafted a plan to dedicate 10 percent of apprentice slots to women. The city ran ads for NEW to boost recruiting and the Department of Labor pitched in by granting its grads fast-track entry into union apprenticeships, while developers and institutions committed to a long-term goal of 15 percent journeywomen and female apprentices.

Two years after Bloomberg took a sledgehammer to the glass ceiling, these efforts have fostered opportunity for women like Keller across a variety of old boys' trades.

NEW President Amy A. Peterson estimates that women now hold 4 percent of local construction jobs, up from 2.2 percent several years ago, a small but significant increase. And NEW will enroll 400 women this year, more than double the number in 2005. To Peterson, these numbers are no small achievement after 30 years of fighting to hammer out a place for women in the building trades.

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"In the '80s, women couldn't get in the door; in the '90s, more women got in but still the industry didn't accept them," she says. "Today most men who work in construction have worked next to a woman."

"Women are accepted more," agrees Deborah Star Reed, who as a 24-year construction veteran has plenty of memories of times when "women were not invited."

And, notes Peterson, even as the economy slows, such careers remain high-paid options shielded from outsourcing.

"Construction jobs are not leaving," she says. "Women who get into these careers have real skills and are able to continue to support themselves."

Building a life

Such progress aside, for women entering the trades, there are plenty of signs of how little has changed since Rosie the Riveter was sent back home when the men returned from World War II. These women often find themselves the only female on job sites, and many still routinely experience the sexism and harassment that have long been synonymous with construction trades.

What's more, the work is physically demanding and often quite dangerous, as the recent fatal crane accidents in Manhattan attest.

"Every morning I say, I want to come home with all my parts and alive," says Keller.

Still, women are drawn to these trades for the same reason many men are: The pay is good, job security is high, and the work can be rewarding.

On the second floor of a partially completed 18-story building at the Queens West 5 development in Long Island City, carpenter Doniessa D'Andrade shows off what will one day be a luxury two-bedroom condo. On a sunny weekday morning, stunning East River views provide the only sign of elegance in the dusty, sheetrock-strewn space, which echoes with a chorus of drills and hammers. Bit by bit, though, rooms are taking shape as D'Andrade obscures sections of the drop ceiling with sheetrock.

Black ponytail peeking out from under a hard hat decorated with stripes and stars, D'Andrade, 29, exudes an infectious enthusiasm. An apprentice carpenter with Local 45, the Queens native has overcome huge obstacles, from an abusive home to a stint in prison, to reach this point.



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"I didn't think I could have a career," she says. "I could get any job - McDonald's or Wendy's - but I didn't think I would be able to make decent money and support myself."

As a teenager, D'Andrade enjoyed making plaques and small furniture in a woodshop class. But she never thought of her hobby as a possible career until she noticed a NEW ad near her home in Far Rockaway. Eager for an alternative to clerical work, D'Andrade signed up for the program, which teaches practical skills such as trades math as well as physical fitness to prepare women for strenuous physical labor.

Many of D'Andrade's male colleagues greet her warmly as she walks through the site, and one carpenter goes out of his way to praise her determination to The Post. Yet she is always aware of her status as a female pioneer in a man's world, and her sunny attitude is partly self-defense.

"You can reach out to NEW for counseling or help, but on a job site you're on your own," she says, acknowledging that a steady stream of abuse and sexual harassment has forced her to grow "a tougher skin."

D'Andrade's drive and professionalism have helped her win respect - but, she notes, that can invite problems, too.

"One of the major challenges you face on the job is, if you're a good worker, some guys are intimidated," she says.

Holding her own

On a very different stretch of the Queens waterfront, JFK Airport, shiny new panels of glass greet visitors to the arrivals and departures area of JetBlue's new terminal, now under construction. Glazier Glynda Dacres, 28, has installed much of that glass, working with an otherwise all-male crew.

Dacres, who grew up in Hollis, Queens, began exploring traditionally male careers five years ago when she studied welding at Apex Tech in Manhattan. An outgoing personality helped her feel at home, even though she was the only woman on her floor. When a quiet guy passed her a note in class with his number, she decided to give him a call. They were married in 2005.

Dacres enrolled in NEW's program in 2004, tapping into the financial assistance and the network of women working in construction. After she and her husband had a son in 2005, she put her career on hold to care for him and an older son, but a desire for more than the mommy track soon sent her back to NEW's career office.

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"I was like, I can't stay home doing nothing, this is not me," says Dacres, who now rises at 4:30 each morning to make it to work by 7. Her work, she says, is "fun; it's something different. I'm not in an office all day."

Dacres admits with a smile that when she first heard the term glazing, she didn't know what it meant. But a painter's union official who interviewed her asked if she'd consider it, since his team had no women in the trade. A former tomboy who liked to play sports with the boys, Dacres has the stamina to lift heavy sheets of glass. She joined the glaziers Local 1281 in 2006, and is on track to become a journeywoman in two years.

Dacres gets a kick out of installing glass and mirrors in swanky stores like Bloomingdale's and a Tommy Hilfiger boutique. The 40-foot scaffolds at JetBlue's terminal give her pause, but she faces down the anxiety.

"I'm always willing to do something new, and no matter how scared I get, I have to try," she says.

Dacres takes an indulgent view of the male colleagues who decorate the inside of the gang box - a large metal toolbox shared by the crew - with pictures of scantily clad models and porn stars. Noting that some women find the photos disrespectful, Dacres insisted she doesn't mind. She even turns this locker room on wheels into a storage box for maxi pads, when needed.

For D'Andrade, working in a macho world has taught her to speak up carefully when she feels harassed, and ignore minor slights. One of her worst experiences was with a supervisor who made a series of inappropriate sexual comments. When he threw something off a scaffold to get her attention, she snapped, calling him a bastard. A few days later, he handed D'Andrade her final paycheck, saying, "Here's your bastard."

She considered quitting. But doing so would have meant losing more than money, skills, even access to aspects of the city few others see. Beyond all this, carpentry gives D'Andrade something many New Yorkers strive for and never find.

"Some people wake up and they're not happy to go to work, but I am," she says. "No matter what, I'm not going to give up."

Building blocks

For women who want to make it in the construction trades, veterans offer a few suggestions:



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* **Get in shape:** Physical fitness matters when your job involves lifting sheetrock or hiking up a dozen flights of stairs to fix an elevator. "Try to be in the best physical shape you can be in, says Marge Keller, a member of the elevator division of Local 3.

* **Think long term:** "Women can use this as a stepping stone to management by knowing the business from the bottom up," says 24-year veteran Deborah Star Reed.

* **Be open to trying new fields:** Keller got started in elevator maintenance because she missed the test for electrical work, her first choice. Glynda Dacres tried out welding and drywalling before discovering glazing. "You have to be open-minded," she says.

* **Keep tabs on trouble:** If you're subjected to abuse or harrassment on the job, keep a journal to document it, suggests carpenter Doniesea D'Andrade.