

Female hard-hats break ground Nonprofit trains women to work in construction

By MARIA ALVAREZ

Latonia Tripp of Bedford-Stuyvesant wanted more than just to survive.

At 28, she was a single mom with a newborn and a 7-year-old son. She had never had a job and she was fed up.

"I was tired of public assistance," said Tripp, whose mother raised her family on government aid. "We all graduated high school and that was fine. But I wanted more for my kids. I had to improve my life."

This year, Tripp saw an ad about NEW (Nontraditional Employment for Women), a program that trains women to be construction workers, operating engineers, carpenters, plumbers, masons and electricians.

After a free six-week training course this spring, Tripp became a plumber.

She's currently working at the sewage treatment plant site at Kennedy Airport. This summer, she worked in city schools getting the plumbing up and running for the new school year.

Tripp is one of hundreds of women breaking ground in the male-dominated territory of high-paying, blue-collar union jobs.

Even so, fewer than 3% of the city's construction workers are women - but the city's building boom could change all that.

It is estimated that \$21 billion will be spent annually for the next decade on construction, said NEW executive director Anne Rascón. "That's why we need to get more women in the program. Our job is to provide a pipeline to that demand. We want to make sure the trade unions have enough women.

"There is work everywhere," said Rascón. "There is reconstruction in lower Manhattan, the Atlantic Yards, the stadiums ... These are fat-paycheck jobs."

The trick is to make women think construction, she said.

"It's a lifestyle change. It's wearing jeans and boots instead of high heels and skirts. You have to be suited for the job. You can't be afraid of heights and you have to get up at 4:30 in the morning to be at work by 6:30," said Rascón.

Making a living wage is a milestone for Tripp.

"My life is more stable," she said. "I have a 401(k) plan and medical benefits. I feel independent and my kids are happy. It can be done. Just because you're a single parent, we don't have to depend on society or a man to support our families."



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Apprentice plumber Latonia Tripp working at the sewage treatment plant at JFK Airport.