



Hammer and ankh mark entrance to NEW

Women Workers Join Downtown Construction Ranks

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In January and February of this year, as 7 World Trade Center made its rapid ascent skyward, Angela Olszewski could be found hard at work installing tile in many of the building's hundreds of bathrooms. As a woman, Olszewski is a rarity in the male-dominated tile-setting trade. But thanks to an organization called Non-traditional Employment for Women, known as NEW for short, she is one of a growing number of women construction workers taking part in the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan.

In 1999, Olszewski found herself without a job. The position she'd held that summer selling tennis permits for the city Department of Parks and Recreation concluded as fall arrived. But rather than despair over the change in her employment status, Olszewski instead viewed it as opportunity. "I took my layoff and went straight to NEW," she remembers.

She'd heard about NEW several years earlier and been curious about its program to help prepare women for work in the construction trades. Having helped her father with projects around the house since she was a small child, she was undeterred by the prospect of manual work. Even more importantly, she was attracted by the competitive salaries, job security, and benefits that a job in construction promises. Finally, the time was right to learn more.

At NEW, which operates out of a converted Chelsea firehouse, she did exactly that. She enrolled in NEW's free program -- offered as a six-week course on weekdays or as an accelerated program in the evenings and on weekends. The program is designed to introduce women to the various jobs open to them in the construction field, which include everything from electrician to plumber, carpenter to painter, and more. The course gives an introduction to the various trades along with some hands-on experience specific to each, helping women better understand the skill sets required for each position and choose the job best suited to their individual strengths and preferences.

Olszewski knew from the beginning that she wanted to be in a finishing trade, tile setting or painting, for example, rather than doing work that would be concealed, such as electrical wiring or plumbing. "When I walk away, the work that I do will show," she says with satisfaction. By choosing to work with tile, she's been able to leave her mark, literally, on Lower Manhattan. In addition to the bathrooms in the new 7WTC building, she can also take credit for the luxury tile work found in suites at the Ritz-Carlton New York in Battery Park, where she worked in 2001.

"The Ritz-Carlton was one of the most beautiful jobs I have ever been on," she says, recounting the intricate design work and the high-quality crema marble the job required. "It was a complicated layout, and I got my chance to do it, and do it well," she says.



Topics Olszewski touches on include proper work attire

Women find out about NEW in a variety of ways, arrive at the program with different goals, and follow disparate paths when they leave. What unites them, says Olszewski, is the confidence they get while they're there. "And you only gain more confidence as you go through the experience of working in construction," she adds.

Unlike Olszewski, who was referred to NEW by a friend of a friend who thought she might be a good fit for construction, Calie Yousha found her way to NEW thanks to a latent love for building that she rediscovered as a theater major in college. Helping create sets for the various productions she was a part of reconnected her with feelings she first had as a child while doing construction work with her father. "I like working with wood, I like creating things, and I like math," she says. Currently in the final weeks of her NEW training, she hopes to join the carpenter's union in June.



Yousha asks for guidance from a NEW instructor

Sandra Quinones discovered NEW thanks to postings at the unemployment office she went to when she lost her job as an administrative assistant at a medical billing office. "Basically, the building aspect of it is what attracts me," she says. "Being able to point to something and say, 'Hey, I had a part in that.'"

For former street vendor Ellen Woods, it was an ad in the *Village Voice*, and the proper frame of mind, that made it the right time to switch to NEW. She'd grown tired of the unpredictable nature of street vending. "The weather, the competition, and the wind all make it variable employment," she says. In her mind, she was seeking something different. "I was moving toward something physical. I saw the ad and thought, 'That's kismet!'"

In fact, NEW depends on all of those methods -- word of mouth, advertising, and fate -- to bring women to the Chelsea center. And a recent collaboration with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) has helped spread the word about the program even further. Money provided by the downtown rebuilding agency has funded additional advertising in area papers.

"The value of the LMDC's contribution is that it allows us to reach out to a broader audience," says NEW Executive Director Anne Rascon. Still, the program, funded as it is by private donations and some government contributions -- and 100 percent free for attendees -- is "one of the best kept secrets in New York," Rascon says.

For Olszewski, her NEW experience is one that has come full circle. Even while juggling the ever changing demands of a series of construction jobs, she finds time to give back to the center that helped her get her start. She teaches a class called "Job Readiness" as part of NEW's evening curriculum. In it, she shares the knowledge she has gained in the course of her career.

"I run it like an orientation," she says. "Here's what it's going to be like in Non-Trad (non-traditional employment for women)." She touches on issues ranging from timeliness to sexual discrimination to how to select the best work clothes for a job. As an example, she offers this: "New employees need to know that if you are traveling in the subways at 5 a.m. -- as you need to in order to get to work on time -- the trains are still operating on the night schedule. Knowing that makes a difference."

Theater-major-turned-construction-worker Yousha puts it this way: "If this program keeps doing what it's doing, I'll be working with more women on each job I take." As NEW continues to receive help from the LMDC and alums like Olszewski, Yousha has every reason to expect exactly that.

Women interested in pursuing a career in construction are encouraged to contact NEW directly, at (212) 627-6252. You may also visit NEW's website, at www.new-nyc.org, or go to its offices, at 243 West 20th Street.



Woods at work with her miter box in a NEW class