

Press-Telegram (Long-Beach, CA)

April 11, 1993

BLUE-COLLAR WOMAN

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A yellow plastic warning strip cordons off the industrial work zone. The message it carries is repeated over and over like an electronic message board. CAUTION MEN WORKING - CAUTION MEN WORKING - CAUTION MEN WORKING.

Just within the boundaries of the edict, Neshtey Crudup hoists a couple of 10-foot conduits into a ditch. She weighs 125 pounds and stands 5-foot-1 in muddy rubber boots. Her task is to run the pipe to a transformer for emergency power at the Terminal Island Treatment Plant.

In the course of the project she will pick and shovel a 4-foot- deep, 100-foot-long trench, hook up motors, set anchors, carry ladders, bend pipes, read blueprints, measure lines, set switch gears, make up lugs, pull wire, cut wire, terminate wire.

She's a woman in a man's world, a self-reliant electrician who beat the odds and learned a trade. Hers is a gritty world of high voltage and heat, dirt and danger, nerve-shattering noise and death-defying heights, metal lunch pails and male locker art.

It hasn't been easy. Looking back to the days 11 years ago when she began her 4-year apprenticeship, the 41-year-old single mom says she didn't think she'd make it the first year. Then something happened, something powerful.

"It made me strong," she declares with easy confidence. "I've worked hard. I've worked with hot stuff. I've been shocked. It's dirty. It's rough on your nails. But I've earned as much as \$50,000 in a year with overtime. I learn something new every day. It's taught me that if I get in any hard situation, on or off the job, I can deal with it.

"The only person you really have is yourself."

At a time when women are entering the American work force in record numbers, the overwhelming majority continue to work at low-paying pink collar jobs and jobettes. Top occupations for women include secretarial work, child care, nursing, teaching, hairdressing and waitressing, according to U.S. Department of Labor reports. (Of the nearly 4 million secretaries in the country, the agency reports, 99 percent are women.)

Conversely, the number of women in nontraditional, highly skilled blue collar jobs - jobs that usually come with fat paychecks and good benefits - account for less than 7 percent.

"Working at a trade is a secret men have had for years," says Lynn Dabney, one of a growing number of women who work at trades and are determined to get the word out that skilled blue collar work is not the sole province of men. "It's way past time to let women know they can earn a decent wage, have freedom, make choices, send their kids to college. Learning a trade gives you self-confidence. It gives you choices."

Dabney is a 38-year-old Long Beach electrician currently studying laboring women for a thesis she is writing in a master's degree program at California State University/Long Beach. She and Vivian Price, also an electrician, have just produced a 10-minute video they are sending to labor unions and community colleges nationwide to get the word out about nontraditional jobs for women.

Other women are taking active roles in trade unions. At the U.S. Naval Shipyard, for example, Maria Antonietta "Toni" Ramirez, general foreman of the insulation shop, is a strong voice for women. Luisa Gratz, president of International Longshore and Warehousemen Union Local 26, is another. Last month she was named the organization's first ever Woman of the Year.

The invisible workers

Inroads into male blue collar bastions are being made slowly, hard-hat-wearing women say. But, for the most part, women who work as longshoremen and truck drivers, sheet metal workers and construction inspectors, telephone installers and refrigeration mechanics are hidden from view.

“Little girls don't even think of learning a trade,” Dabney says. “There are no role models. When I lecture at schools, young women are incredulous that there are training programs out there. Men haven't let the secret out because - for some - it's a threat to their manhood. They tell everyone how difficult their job is. When small women can do the same thing, it blows their cover.”

Ruth Milkman, a professor of sociology and women's studies at UCLA who has conducted research on women in the labor force, says it's a fallacy that women don't learn trades because they're not interested or suited for that kind of work. After World War II, surveys were conducted of women who had lost their nontraditional wartime factory jobs when the men came home, she says that “the vast majority of them - about 80 percent - said they wanted to keep their jobs,” and adds: “Job segregation by sex has got to be dismantled.”

“Working in a trade is hard,” electrician Vivian Price says. “There is sexual harassment. It's rough to be the only woman in a shop. But women should have choices of how to make a decent living with some independence and freedom of movement.”

Adds Dabney: “Women who work in the trades often are not accepted. They've gone against all the norms. As a result, a lot of them have a strong sense of self. At some level, they want to be part of the change in the country. They think they should earn a decent living. They are outspoken. They are strong and high-spirited.”

Women of contrasts

Joanne McCaughey is an enigma - a feminine woman who wears dangling silver earrings and likes to be pampered; a sheet metal mechanic who wears steel-tipped boots and likes to rip out bulkheads.

It's 7:30 a.m. at the Naval Shipyard, and she's ready to go. She's dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans with suspenders. Her safety glasses and face shield are in place. She lowers her hard hat over a mane of hair that travels past her waist. She has pinned a button next to her ID badge. It reads: Don't Mourn - Organize.

Her bag is packed with the tools of her trade: drill motor, hand popgun, grinders, ratchets, sockets, hacksaw, tin snips, vise grips, ice tongs, a tin hammer, a rubber mallet, drill bits, a quackenbush - an object that looks like a minisaw used to cut metal. A whistle blows. She approaches her job with determination and purpose.

In the course of the day, she might lug her 20-pound tool bag up a forest of ladders, “search and destroy” a bulkhead, install a urinal partition and squirm through a crawl space high above the ventilation system. At 41, this mother of three nearly grown daughters is a study in true grit.

“I'm not macho. I'm a well-balanced female,” she says with a ready smile. “I work hard. I also love to dress up and wear heels. I believe what I do is important. I'm proud of it.”

In 1984 when McCaughey passed a civil service exam making her eligible for a job at the shipyard, she was divorced and working at a dead-end accounting job. “I knew nothing,” she says. “‘Oh,’ I thought, ‘this will be just like sewing.’ I sew. I know how to follow directions. You take a pattern and lay it up. “I can do this.”

McCaughy traces her can-do attitude to her mother, and her birth order. She remembers changing diapers at 5. She is the oldest of 10. Although she has had her fair share of hard knocks on the job, she says there has never been a time when she didn't look forward to going to work.

“What ‘blue collar’ means to me is hard work. It means physical labor. To me, it's about the most important work there is. Tradespeople are a dying breed. But there would be no bridges, no cars, no sailboats, no homes without them.

“Blue collar workers start out with nothing. They end up with a creation.”

McCaughy, a lean 5-foot-7 and 125 pounds, lives with her boyfriend, who also works at the shipyard. They've been together nine years, and have “an equal opportunity” relationship. When you work all day as a sheet metal mechanic, you don't feel compelled to go home and become Betty Crocker, McCaughey says. Though she is close to her daughters, she says her ex-husband has done most of the child rearing. “He got custody because he had the job. He had the money. I knew the girls would have a better chance.”

The open, friendly expression momentarily dims. "If I had it to do over, I'd have custody," she adds. "I'd risk having no job, no training. It's hard. There are a lot of moms out there like me. The husband's got the skill and the high-paying job. He gets the kids."

(The Century Freeway Women's Employment Program recently surveyed 107 female apprentices and journeymen. The survey found that 57 percent are mothers, 67 percent are single. Further, the survey reported that 68 percent are Anglo, 75 percent are between the ages of 26 and 40, and 42 percent have some college education.)

Time of testing

Looking back to the days of her four-year apprenticeship, McCaughey recalls uncertainty and fear. The work was physically demanding, the responsibility daunting. She frequently asked herself: Can I do this? Will I make a fool of myself? Will I hurt myself or someone else?

Then there were the sexual harassment, the lewd gestures, the crude language, the catcalls. "About 93 percent of the men I've worked with are supportive," she says. "The other 7 percent try to get in your pants." Still, she says she's learned more on the job and has had more leadership experiences as a union activist and women's spokeswoman than she ever dreamed.

"On a good year, I make \$30,000," she says. "This job has given me a lot of confidence. People are in awe. They say, 'You work on a ship?' I say, 'Yeah.'"

At 47, Toni Ramirez is admired and powerful. As general foreman of the insulation shop, she supervises 53 workers and has earned a reputation as a leader on environmental issues at the shipyard and beyond. Last fall, one group named her Hispanic Lady of the Year for outstanding service and for her commitment to equal opportunity. Of the 15 people she's recently hired, six are women and four are Latino.

"The women are all little, and they're all dynamic," she says. "Women should not be kept from going outside and doing things that will make them strong."

Certainly the sweet-faced, soft-voiced dynamo never was. From the time she and her twin sister helped their father repair the family car in Corpus Christi, Texas, where she was reared, to her experience in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War, Ramirez says she's always gravitated toward her own interests than to those imposed by others.

Like many women who work at nontraditional jobs, she is a direct, no frills, able-bodied woman who values hard work, fixes her own car, repairs her plumbing and describes herself as both strongly family-oriented and fiercely independent.

"My father was the guiding light in my life, my inspiration," she says. "He believed the only boundaries there are are the ones we put up ourselves. I have no boundaries."

When she began her apprenticeship in 1979, she earned \$5.81 an hour. Today she earns \$55,000 and owns a Tudor home in North Long Beach where she lives with a sister and 2-year-old nephew. She loves to garden, plays the stock market, studies tai chi.

"I have a sincere desire to take care of myself," she says. "I've passed the stage in life as a woman when the only thing you live for is a man. If I were married, my husband would want to make the decisions. I can't have that. I have something between my ears."

Overcoming fears

As an apprentice, Ramirez says she was both shocked and overwhelmed by the massive size of the ships she was assigned to and by their complex insulation systems.

"When I took my first look, I said, 'Dear God, what have I gotten myself in to?'" she recalls. "Insulators work on piping and machinery - any system that requires insulation. It's a whole separate world. It's awesome. Now when someone says, 'Go and insulate the exhaust piping,' I know exactly what to do. I am completely comfortable. There has been a lot of growth. There's a lot of pride."

"The ability to take responsibility and pressure has nothing whatsoever to do with gender."

Mary Otulakowski, a strong but small 5-foot-4, 115-pound Teamster, says no one who ever asks what she does for a living believes her. She doesn't try to convince. She just tells them she's a clerk. She recently attended her 10th high school reunion in Detroit and says she was appalled by the number of classmates she once knew who are sitting in the same place doing the same thing.

"I'm a go-getter. I've been to Europe. I want to see the world. I want to have kids. I have the greatest mom and dad in the world. They didn't hand us things. I always worked hard mowing lawns, delivering papers, shoveling snow.

"I love to get all dressed up and wear 3-inch heels," she adds. "But I don't mind getting dirty and having no makeup on. I've learned that if you depend on anything except your ability and your mind, you'll never go anywhere."

In her book "Revolution From Within," Gloria Steinem compares the friends she grew up with in the working-class neighborhoods of East Toledo with her chums at Smith College. The women from the local factories who'd gone back to school and demanded fair treatment and fatter pay envelopes were "full of rebellion, humor, energy, and a certain earthy wisdom that seemed to say 'I'm myself now - take it or leave it.'"

The white collar women tended to express more self-doubt and tension, she says.

"Since more East Toledo women had to work to help support their families," Steinem writes, "they also were forced to discover their strength and independence. Since Smith women were more likely to have husbands who could afford a dependent wife, many had been deprived of the self-confidence that comes from knowing you can support yourself."

In every background and occupation, there are casualties. Yet, women in nontraditional jobs test their mettle in ways that do seem to nurture confidence and pride, Steinem says.

As Neshtey Crudup surfaces from a ditch after a long week, she has more a look of exhaustion than anything resembling confidence or pride. She's been putting in a lot of overtime lately. Over the years her income has fluctuated as much as \$30,000 - from a low of about \$18,000 to a high of more than \$50,000. After a hard week

It's Friday afternoon and she's worn out. Her hands are calloused. She's hot and dirty.

"I definitely don't want to be an old lady doing this work," she says. "It scares me. Maybe I'll marry a rich man."

With that, she laughs heartily. "I don't want to be independent in a relationship. Men always say, 'Nesh, you can do it.' They take for granted I can carry everything, do everything. When I get home, I want to be treated like a dumb office type who can't lift nothing."

She laughs at herself again. Over the years, humor has served her well. She may work within the confines of CAUTION MEN WORKING tapes, but she has broken through boundaries of discrimination with an easy laugh and a strong will.

"Don't let fear stop you from doing what you want to do," she says. "Take the first step and try something new. It's not easy. But it can be done."