A New Way to See Us: Tradeswomen's Stories
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Special Feature  
Resources  
Reading & Discussion Guide
For 25 years, Literature for All of Us has used books, creative writing, and reflective conversation to facilitate circles of connection, healing, and growth in the face of social inequity throughout the city of Chicago. Our curricula often include poetry collections, fiction/nonfiction literature, and essay collections to reflect the individuals in our trauma-informed book groups.

Literature for All of Us has gathered together with the women and gender-nonconforming participants of the Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) Technical Opportunities Program (TOP) to read and write poetry, to exchange experiences of triumph and failure, to share laughter (and a few tears), and most of all, to honor each other’s stories from start to finish over the course of the TOP program for nearly ten years.

Our process, while simple, is enriched by trained book group leaders and facilitators. Each week, we read a bit of text and engage in conversations and activities that circle back to both the source material and our experiences (lived and shared). From there, we write inspired letters, affirmations, and poems together and read aloud some of the magic that gets made when pen hits paper. With CWIT, we consistently draw inspiration for discussion and writing from the essay anthology Hard-Hatted Women: Life on the Job (Martin, Molly. Seal Press; 2nd edition, 1997).

Each time Literature for All of Us book group leaders would introduce what we call our “Hard-Hatted Women curriculum,” the TOP students would say the same things: “Where was this book when I…” or “I want to know more about this trade.”

The fact that a collection like Hard-Hatted Women existed felt like a door had finally opened for the TOP participants in group discussions. The buzz about whether the next session would highlight a trade many of the women and GNC participants were considering electrified conversations, and their commitment to the trades program was strengthened. However, with praise would come thoughtful inquiries such as, “This is great, but some of these stories aren’t relevant to me.” After all, Hard Hatted-Women was published in 1997, and in 2021, some things have drastically changed and yet are eerily the same when it comes to women and gender-nonconforming tradespeople in their fields. So Literature for All of Us decided it was time to update the stories we read.
With *A New Way to See Us: Tradeswomen’s Stories*, Literature for All of Us undertook a project that brought us back together with alumni of the TOP program. For this project, we invited guests to create a new anthology to reflect the people and times we live in today. Through interviews, poetry written over the course of our partnership with Chicago Women in Trades, artwork, and essays, we hope that this anthology offers a little bit of something for everyone. Each story offers professional and personal wisdoms about working in the trades, and we hope you keep returning to it as you enter and explore trades work, or reflect on next best steps for your life.

Literature for All of Us believes each of our stories — and the ones we read — help us understand our past choices. And we believe in rewriting our futures in a way that is as durable as iron and steel. We cannot thank enough the women and gender-nonconforming tradespeople who continue to pave the road for the next generation.
Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) has been helping women build satisfying careers in the construction industry since 1981. Founded by tradeswomen fighting for equal opportunity to work, learn, and advance in construction careers, CWIT exists to do just that. We prepare and support women in construction careers through our pre-apprenticeship and welding training programs, and promote fair treatment in the workplace through our policy and technical assistance initiatives.

Construction careers have a lot to offer: high wages, great benefits, transferrable skills, pride of accomplishment, and the confidence you gain from knowing that you can fix it yourself. Why, then, don't more women choose a career in construction? As anyone who has ever driven past a construction site knows, it is still rare to catch a glimpse of a tradeswoman on the job. In fact, just 4% of the industry’s skilled workforce is female. While culture changes slowly, it is changing, and it is now commonplace to see women in roles once exclusively reserved for men. Thanks to women like the ones featured in this booklet, greater numbers of women are now entering the construction trades, opening the doors wider for more women to follow.

We are very pleased to partner with Literature for All of Us to bring you a window into the challenges and victories of women working in the construction trades. Aspiring tradeswomen in Chicago and many other major cities are fortunate to have access to training and a community of tradeswomen to guide and support them along the way. Many other women are not so fortunate, and in these pages, we hope you will find the inspiration and the tools to chart your own path, build a career you can be proud of, and join the thousands of women across the country who are smashing stereotypes, changing minds, and building a new reality in which women’s skills and talents are welcomed and respected in any field they choose to pursue.
Dear Reader,

I first walked into a room full of women in a pre-apprenticeship training program with Chicago Women in Trades in the Fall of 2013. I was there as a book group leader with Literature for All of Us, facilitating weekly book group discussions with a group of thoughtful, powerful, talented, adventurous women taking a chance on themselves and a new career. They were preparing to enter the male-dominated field of trades work, and our book group spaces were an opportunity to read and write stories of challenge, triumph, growth, and discovery, as well as time to connect with their classmates on a personal level.

I am beyond honored and grateful that seven years after first meeting tradeswomen through Chicago Women in Trades and Literature for All of Us, I had the opportunity to meet and interview nine more amazing tradeswomen through this project. I met even more tradeswomen via art they generously shared to be included in this publication. In the middle of a global pandemic, I continued to meet thoughtful, powerful, talented, adventurous women continuing to take chances on themselves in careers spanning a few years to decades-long. I can’t wait for you to meet them all.

Reader, I am excited for you to delve into these pages, where you will be enlightened by the lessons tradeswomen shared, awed by the skill and talent of artists who offered poetry and visual art, and either inspired to pursue a career in trades yourself or simply leave more aware and thankful for the tradespeople all around us. I can’t wait for you to chuckle at Laura’s forthright tone, gasp at Jackie’s scary moment three-stories up, and grit your teeth alongside Eva as she tells her story of perseverance. You are in for a treat as you learn about Pam’s 30-year long career (she’s still going!), and Kina and Jackie’s paths from on-the-ground trades work to becoming instructors. I know you will love discovering what drew each of these people to the trades, and you will love learning how they continue to build their careers. You will find advice for handling difficult co-workers, reflections on the value of a support system, and tips for learning, growing, and remaining in a career in the trades.

Paris, Rhea, Pam, Ingrid, Jackie, Laura, Shun, Eva, and Kina – my immense gratitude to each of you for trusting me with your powerful, beautiful, and sometimes painful insights into your lives and careers. My sincerest thanks also for the support and collaboration of the staffs of Chicago Women in Trades and Literature for All of Us—especially Gaby Garay, Abby Harris-Ridker, Sharon Latson-Flemister, Ruth Orme-Johnson, and haydee souffrant—as we brought A New Way to See Us: Tradeswomen’s Stories into being.

rebecca brown
Chicago, IL
March 2021
I’ve always liked physical jobs. Before I became an ironworker, I worked in pest control for six and a half years. Before that, I went to school for automotive technology. I had a job as a janitor. Most women don’t want to go clean up crap, but I applied because I saw there was a job for me. I always looked for places where they’d need a woman. I always found jobs that no one wanted to do, and I would do that. Just eight short years ago, I was homeless for eight months. It was rough. After that, I got into doing pest control. Of course, pest control is a male-dominated industry like ironworking, where I had to work twice as hard as the guys who weren’t doing jack. I resented those guys a little bit because they took it easy when they’d go in, but I’d come in and get on my knees to look under stuff. Some people appreciated how I worked and would tell me, “The other guys don’t ever do that.”

But of course I’d have to keep that quiet. A lot of the guys would just go into people’s houses, spray the baseboards, and leave without actually looking for pests. To be honest, the layperson thinks that’s work. But I put my blood, sweat, and tears into pest control. I thought I was going to retire doing that.

I love the challenges. I just love pushing myself. I’ll say, You know what? I can do this, and I’m gonna be better than you at it. When I got good at pest control, I started seeing where the guys around me were lacking. I had gotten promoted and was making twenty bucks an hour, which is the most I had ever made in my life. But the company kept getting away from the bottom line, which was killing pests and solving the customer’s problem. They had us out there selling too much, and it made me hate pest control. When I got tired of it, I started wondering: Where do I go now where I can start out making $20 or more an hour?

I remember taking a week’s vacation in August, and the weekend before I had to go back to work, I got a pit in my stomach. You know that feeling you get when you really don’t want to return to something? I was at the Bud Billiken Day parade (the largest African-American parade in the United States, which happens every year in Chicago on the second Saturday in August), and I saw Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) in the parade. That was my epiphany. I had known about them before, but when I first heard about the pre-apprenticeship program, my son was young, and I couldn’t dedicate 12 weeks to doing it. But when I saw CWIT at the parade, my son was bigger, so I could go back and do it. I motioned the girl over to me to get a flyer too quick! And sure enough, that August I went to the first information session I could get to — and that’s how I got started in the trades.
The circle of people around me is really small. When I was starting in the trades, one of my best friends would laugh at me because I had to stop smoking weed (I’d found out at the CWIT information session that you have to pass a drug test before starting a trades apprenticeship), but he was supportive. When I started at CWIT, my son understood that I couldn’t be at his basketball games which happened to be every Thursday, because that also happened to be a night I had school. He was excited about it. After my graduation, he asked me, “Why don’t you want to be an ironworker?” I had been telling him I was going to be joining the plumbers union or electricians union. When I started CWIT, ironworking was completely out of the question because I’m afraid of heights (I’m working on it though!). I didn’t know that there were two types of ironworkers – all I knew was they’d be those people on beams 90 stories up. The ironworkers school was the first one we visited with CWIT, and I was kind of sold. I thought, I could put my fears aside for this. Thank goodness I ended up in a trade where I’m mostly on the ground, though.

My son is 16 now and has been so excited about it. He tells his friends all the time that I’m an ironworker. Even when I was an exterminator, he was not ashamed. He’s happy to tell people his mama’s doing this “men’s work.”

I’m an ironworker and technically a second-year apprentice. When I joined the ironworkers, I started with the fence program. They have two different programs—the fence program and the building side where they do windows, curtain walls, and miscellaneous metals. The fence program is supposed to be a six-year program. You do three years as an apprentice and three years as a journeyman, but this year they moved me over to miscellaneous metals. So even though I will be a second-year apprentice for fence, I’m a first-year apprentice with miscellaneous metals.

When I worked in fencing, one thing we would do on a regular basis is use post hole diggers to dig holes. People have quit on the first day of work from just digging holes because of the physical aspect. When I started doing fencing, I thought I was ready because I was in shape. Everything I learned from my pre-apprenticeship program, I regularly applied it to my life. I changed my diet up, and I’ve always been a stickler about working out, so that was my thing. I thought I was ready, but I wasn’t ready. We would dig holes, pour concrete, set posts, move concrete, apply panels. Even with temporary fencing, we would pound posts into the dirt. Stretching a chain link fence is also really hard. Fencing is strenuous, period. I happen to love fencing because of the physicality of it.

Now that I’m working in miscellaneous metals, I’m doing a lot more welding. I’m being exposed to the heights a little more and using the angle grinder a little more – a lot more, as a matter of fact. I’m doing everything a lot more than I was doing. This is real structural work now. The chain link fences and everything I was doing before was nice, but this is like the real deal now. We’re putting up things like balconies and rails and stairs.
To give an idea of what I do now, on a recent job we were putting diamond plates on balconies, and we were installing some stairs for apartments. We’d go in, meet at the gangbox (a toolbox or workbox everybody on the job can use) and have our gangbox talk. The foreman would have the blueprints and tell us what we needed to do. Then we’d bring in our materials and set up a welding machine, checking gas and oil and things like that before we turned it on. When I got there, we were sliding the diamond plates on and doing a lot of welding on the balconies, standing up rails and welding the rails onto the balcony.

There’s a lot more cuts these days, a lot more burns, a lot more harness wearing. I’m learning a lot, and it’s pretty cool. I’m ready to keep learning. That’s my Buddhism when I come upon a challenge, it’s actually the opportunity to go from ordinary to extraordinary. That growth, that fight even through all these challenges. You keep on with the conviction than I’m going to win, I’m going to overcome this struggle, and I’m going to be better than what I was when I started
I'm a tactile learner, so I learn better hands on. I learn well if you tell me, but I learn better if you show me. When I graduated from high school, I wanted to be an architect. I went to UIC (University of Illinois at Chicago) until I couldn’t afford it anymore, and then I looked for a job. It kind of worked out since I’m still in the construction and building industry. I’m also currently pursuing my bachelor’s in construction management. Now I can afford to go to college, and I’m paying my way through. I’m a journeyman carpenter and have been in the trades for five years.

My family was very supportive and enthusiastic when I got into the trades. As soon as I started, they’d ask, “Do you want to come do some trim? Do you want to come do this and that? It’s okay you don’t know how to do it yet, you can learn!” I loved and appreciated it so very much.

A Day in the Life
You wake up early and show up to the job early. I had to learn to do that. I like being up early because you get your day started and have a lot more of the day. Do I like waking up early? Absolutely not. When you get to your job site, you meet up with whoever you’re working with and get your assignment for the day. If you already know what your assignment’s going to be, you go wherever you are working. As soon as the clock strikes start time, you get to work. You put on your toolbelt and have your tools ready. I’ve learned to do some drywall since I first began as a carpenter. I’ve done mostly layout, framing, hardware, doors, some drywall, and finish wall paneling.

When I first started out, I worked for a large subcontracting company that did interior framing, drywall, and some finish work. I remember the first time I was doing a job inside and got to start at 6am. We were adding a Starbucks inside of a Target, and it was really fun. My work before that was more of an 8am-4pm job because of noise restrictions when I was working on high rises in downtown Chicago and in the northern part of Chicago. The tallest one I worked on was 80 stories, and the shortest one was a 15-story building. They were all new construction, being built from the ground up. I like the clean slate, I suppose. You can make it right and what it’s supposed to be, for the most part.

People always ask if I work inside. Well, my definition of “inside” has changed. To me inside is when all the mechanicals in a building are operating — when there’s indoor plumbing, heating, and cooling. If it doesn’t have those things, then you’re pretty much still outside. Working between concrete slabs 50 stories in the air is like working in an icebox. There are no windows; you’re outside. The kind of jobs I do now have been remodels and a couple of new builds, but they’ve been slow. They’ve all been on the south side of Chicago, which is really cool. I’m building where I grew up, which is exciting to see.
Learning on the Job
Sometimes you feel a moment of, “Okay, I’m good. I’m a part of this group or community.” I’ve never been cliquish, but it’s still a good feeling to be a part of a community, which is different than being cliquish. One of the guys I worked with had some DANGER, APPRENTICE stickers that he’d put on the apprentices’ hardhats. It was the shape and color of a DANGER sign, and then it said “apprentice” right underneath it. Some of the apprentices had it, and I was determined I wasn’t going to get a sticker on my hardhat. The journeyman I was working with would always try to get me; he’d sneak up on me and try to slap the sticker on my hardhat, and I’d be ducking and diving. One time, he finally got me. Then one of the other guys on the job got me a sticker that said Fucking Classy.

I remember a time when my foreman gave me the opportunity to do something that I wasn’t the most comfortable with but needed to learn how to do — and me being like, nah.

In the apprenticeship class, we got trained on the different machines like the scissor lift and the boom lift. During my pre-apprenticeship, I had been on the lift, but four years later I’d still never driven one on the job by myself. One day the foreman told me, “I need to get these cones off the roof.” The roof was the fifth story of this building. The foreman asked, “Have you ever driven a boom?” I said, “Well, technically, yes. How much experience do I have? Not so much.” To which he replied, “Alright, well you’re going to learn today.”

He gave me the keys and told me to get the lift, drive it over, take the boom up, and he’d meet me on the roof. He reminded me what everything in the lift does and told me to go for it. I took my time because I wanted to be careful. Boom lifts are really bouncy. You have to wear a harness and be tied off to the machine because it can eject you. It shouldn’t eject you, but it can if you’re doing something you shouldn’t be doing.

I got over to the roof and was raising myself up, and the lift was bouncing. My foreman kept telling me to take it up some more because I wasn’t high enough. I was looking around from where I was and told him, “This is pretty high! Higher? Okay.” I went up and got as close as I could and my foreman was still yelling out, “Closer! Closer!”

Even when you’re making little movements with the lift, if they’re not really smooth, it’s really jerky. You’re so far away from the base and the stability that it bounces more. I finally got up to the roof, and we started loading the cones in. I was surrounded by cones, and my foreman asked, “You think you could fit one more, or are you going to have to take another trip?” I was just thinking, “I think we can fit one more because I’m not making another trip!” So I got all the cones, and then we went down. I thought I was done, but then I had to do a bunch more trips with the boom. I got more comfortable with it, of course, and started feeling, “Oh, I got this now!” That was pretty cool.

Advice for Getting Into and Navigating the Trades
If you want to do it, be persistent. You might get lucky and get that yes on the first try. You might not. For me, it took me a while, and it didn’t really matter. If you want to do it, be persistent and do it. Don’t get too easily discouraged. If you need some support, find it. It’s out there, especially with Chicago Women in Trades or other Women in Trades organizations like the Chicago Sisterhood of Carpenters.
Your experience is extremely dependent on the people, the company, and the job that you work with. I’ve gotten a lot more opportunities to do different things and learn new things with the company I’m with now. It depends on who you’re working with. There is a level of trust that needs to be had. Sometimes if it’s easier and quicker to get the work done by you being assigned something you already know how to do instead of teaching you something new, that’s just how it goes.

I keep a duffel bag in my car with an extra set of full work gear, including shirt, pants, socks, boots, hardhat, and safety glasses, just in case. Remember that you are responsible for your own safety and well-being. Some guys do stupid and unsafe stuff, but just remember that you’re ultimately liable for what you do. You might sue the company, but you’re going to be the one that’s injured, and that’s not a risk you should be willing to take.

Sometimes I’ll take advantage of being a woman when a guy offers to do something for me that’s unsafe. I’m thinking, “You want to grind without a face shield? Go for it, because I’m not cutting it.” At times I’ve been handed a grinder and told to cut something. I ask, “Do you have a face shield to go with that? No? Then no, I just can’t do that one.”

I had a friend who was working for a really crappy company. My friend’s business agent said not to quit because there wasn’t a lot of work out there. I told my friend, “They’re a really crappy company, and if you think you could get a job somewhere else, go for it.” There are crappy companies out there. Although you might not want to risk damaging your reputation because you quit a job, if it’s a crappy company, nobody’s going to care. Just don’t tell your next company that you used to work for them.

The company my friend was working for wasn’t giving them their paychecks on time and was really bad about safety. I couldn’t imagine it at the time because the first company I worked for set my expectations and standards pretty high. I know quitting a job is hard, and it’s probably not something I would have done in my first year because I didn’t have the confidence and because it took so much to get my first job. But if I worked for a company that wasn’t giving me my paycheck? That wouldn’t have worked for me. The grass can be greener on the other side.

It’s good to hear other people’s experiences and take what you can from them, but their experiences are their experiences. Other people’s experiences may not — and probably will not — be yours. I know some women have really negative experiences in the trades, but there are also some women who have been fortunate enough to not have them. There’s something to be said for both of those things. If you have negative experiences, you can learn from them and learn how to deal with them. If you haven’t had negative experiences, then you know you don’t have to tolerate that.
Hopes
I just hope we keep moving forward as women and as minorities in the field. I hope things become more equal because it's a never-ending fight, it seems.

To do that, we need accountability and money. When it comes to money, it's not just about pay rates but also about where the money goes. You hear about disinvestment from certain areas. If there was equal investment, that might be a start. And if there was accountability, that'd be even better. There are some laws that require a certain number of women and minorities to be hired, but if a company doesn't meet it, there are often no repercussions. Or the repercussions are minor and not enough to make an impact.

We have a department that is supposed to hold people accountable when they don't meet certain hiring requirements, but if the department isn't funded, what can they do? And if a company isn't fined, what impact does that have?

I often forget how big of a city I live in. I've become more aware of how isolating it can be for tradeswomen who are in more isolated areas and who don't have access to a more diverse or supportive community. I hope that they're able to find community somewhere because it really does help. You don't get very far without some sort of support system. I have an excellent one with my family, sisters in the trades, and even other journeymen who have taken the time to teach me something. I'm so fortunate and grateful for my support system.
An acrostic poem entitled *Sisterhood* by Betty Gipson featuring the words:
Beginnings
I grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago, but I also spent a lot of time as a child in Indiana in the summer because my grandparents were retired. My mom was a single mother and thought it would be better if my sister and I weren’t home alone during the summer.

My grandfather was a retired pipefitter. When he moved out to Plymouth, Indiana, he bought a house with a shop attached to it and had a small welding business going after he retired. It’s interesting to note that I had the opportunity to be familiar with that trade and that kind of work before I even got to be an adult, so it wasn’t as much of a shocking transition for me as it is for a lot of people.

My grandfather ran a tight ship. He would wake us up early in the morning to work. He would give me and my sister a little bit of money, and we would go hang out in town, or he’d play cards with us and win his money back.

He sold the shop a couple of years before I graduated high school. I did not think I was going to be in that line of work so I didn’t even take an interest in a lot of the things I could have had access to, like equipment and tools. But I got the knowledge and experience of being around him and learning what it was to get up in the morning and work all day and not be afraid to get dirty and not be afraid of fire and sparks and swinging hammers. I never really learned how to weld per se from him. It was kind of strange that I had all this opportunity right at my fingertips and didn’t take advantage.

When I graduated high school, I was not really on a college track. I was doing factory work, and my grandfather reached out to me and said, “If you’re doing this kind of blue collar work, why don’t you give the trades a try? Why don’t you give pipefitters a try? Being an alumni myself, I could possibly help you expedite getting in a little bit.”

I graduated high school in 1989 and put in my application in 1990. At the time, the fact that I was female and the fact that I had some legacy in the business made a difference. There’s a lot of legacy in the union trades if you have a name to go in there with, so it was less than a year I had to wait. I literally was a 19-year-old first-year apprentice.
I was already familiar with working around that environment, so I didn’t have a lot of the problems that some people have going in completely cold, where they have no idea what it’s like to show up at 6am, strap on your tools, and just dig in there. A lot of times you get out there and you don’t even know where to begin. At least I already knew if there was an activity happening and I needed to find where my place was, to get in and make forward progress with the group as a whole. I was young, but I had a little bit of a leg up from working with my grandfather, so that helped for sure.

**Seeking Out the Girls**

My first-year-apprentice class was 120 people, including myself and two other women. There were 117 men and no female instructors — no female influence down there at all at the school. One woman was a little older and had been doing that kind of work non-union. We ended up losing track of her because she wasn’t willing to take the initial pay cut as she was already making decent money out there. For whatever reason, she didn’t finish the program, so in the end, just I and one other woman in my class finished.

There had been a couple of women in the program before me. Not large numbers of women, but I definitely wasn’t the first, so I didn’t feel like a complete outsider. I could still look at the pictures on the walls of the classes before and say, “Oh, there is a girl, and a few years ago there was another girl.”

I would get the United Association magazine — a glossy magazine with all the pictures of job sites — and first thing I would do is look through and notice the girls on the job. I would seek them out. I knew I wasn’t well represented, but I knew that there were a few of us out there. That gave me some hope that making a career as a pipefitter was a viable option.
Doing the Work
Since I was an apprentice, I've always been the person who gets in the trenches and works. Granted, as I get more experience, I tend to be more of a leader in that I'm not afraid to teach people or offer advice or point out when things could be done differently. You get that confidence over the years where you know what has to happen and how to explain it to the people of the next generation. I've had supervision opportunities, but I've never been that comfortable with them. For whatever reason, I just like to work.

I'm going to be 50 next year, so I'm going to start bumping up against the whole ageism problem. As of right now, I still look fairly young. I think it helps that I don't look like an old lady out there. You know, visual perception is a lot. Being a woman out there in the field, people want to judge you or figure you out just by having a look at you. They look at me as a woman, but they aren't looking at me as an old woman too badly yet.

I think part of the reason I still have fire in my belly to get out there and work is because I still get a lot of pride out of being a woman who can work in the industry that's dominated by so many men. It's always still in the front of my mind that I'm kind of representing womanhood in a way every time I go out to a new job and am meeting a new group of co-workers. So far, luckily, my body has held up to that image in my head, and I've been able to pull it off all these years.

As with anything else, when you do something enough that you get skilled in it, there's pleasure in doing something that you know how to do well. In 30 years, I've seen a lot. I've seen enough to know that even if it's a new situation, I know how to attack it and not get too wrapped up in feeling awkward about it. I know how to move through things I don't know. We just go do them, and we're open-minded, and we learn. We use common sense and logic and don't beat ourselves up too badly if we make mistakes. That's a big skill. It's really easy to second guess yourself. I've somehow been able to push through that over the years because I just keep showing up, and I keep doing it.

When they say tradesmen or craftsmen — yes, you have to learn your craft, but you also have to learn how to approach all the possible situations. That comes with experience. That's why it's a life-long trade. I like to remind all the men and women who are starting out that this is something that's going to take years to get familiar enough with before you can actually say you are a craftsperson in that particular trade.

Learning to Rely on My Abilities
When I was an apprentice, I started working at a small shop. There were maybe 10 pipefitters on a regular basis who were the permanent staff. They would pick up jobs and hire more and then lay off people as the jobs wound down, but I got to be one of the core group of people. Being in a small shop, you're an important gear in the machine. They put a lot on you because they try to do as much as they can with the small group of people that they have. I was probably a third-year or fourth-year apprentice when the superintendent said he wanted me to go out to Governors State University and look at a big 10-inch pipe inlet filter basket, like a strainer basket out by the cooling towers.

The cooling towers for a building run the water outside. They're the big things that usually look like they have mist coming out of them all the time. That's where they chill the water used for air conditioning. The water runs almost like a fountain on the inside of the cooling towers, and as the heat dissipates from that water, that's how they cool the water down. The cooling towers are exposed to nature and everything that's outside, like leaves, dirt, and debris. Water filters through this one housing with the filter in it, which is hundreds of pounds and a large 10-inch pipe.
My superintendent told me I was going to go out there and change this out with a different basket. He told me, "First, you'll need to figure out where you're going to cut the pipe. You'll need to measure and then come into the shop to prefabricate some of the pipe. Then you'll need to get a crane out there with the new equipment and the pipe that you put together. Once they shut off the system, you're going to cut into the system and remove the old pipe. Then you're going to put in your new piece of pipe, which needs to fit like a glove." So I had to rely on measuring multiple times, because I needed everything I brought out to fit. I knew once I cut this open, I couldn't take a giant 10-inch piece of pipe and hold it up and eyeball it to say what would fit or not. I was relying on my ability to lay it out and to take good measurements.

I had to weld the pieces together and rely on my welds being good so that they could put it back into service right away. There wasn't really an opportunity to test a lot of the welds — as soon as the piece I'd cut was put in, they'd need to fire the cooling towers back up. And I just remember being really nervous about the whole process. I felt like this was a big test of my skills: Do you have what it takes to take this challenge on?

I remember a journeyman gave me some advice at the time. He told me, "In the worst-case scenario, if this doesn't fit, all we can do is go back, figure out what doesn't work, and fix it. It's not like they can put you in pipe jail." I knew this might be a worst-case situation and that I might've gotten laid off that day, but you're never going to get the experience until you actually take the plunge and say, Yes, I'm willing to take that on. I will try this, and I will do the best I can to make it work.

That experience taught me a lot, and it gave me so much confidence. The day I went out to the cooling towers and put in the pipe I'd cut, it fit. I still remember — more than 25 years later — that feeling of standing up on top of that tower signaling the crane and my piece coming in. I remember the feeling of anxiety, but it was just as exciting. My piece worked, and there weren't any problems. I felt a huge amount of pride, relief, and confidence that I could do this work, that I'd been properly taught the skills I needed.

I was careful and methodical about my calculations. I didn't take anything for granted and double-checked everything. It was a big accomplishment. Even now, if I mess something up, I don't feel bad about it because I know it's not a direct reflection of my lack of ability. It's just a direct reflection that I'm a human, and humans sometimes make mistakes. But that's all it is. It's not because I'm dumb. It's not because I'm a woman. It's not because I'm a woman. It's not because I'm a woman. It's not because I'm a woman. It's just a direct reflection that I'm a human, and humans sometimes make mistakes. But that's all it is.

Overall, I'm proud of my abilities as a craftsperson. Being so young and having that opportunity early in my career helped me a lot.

**Advice for Women Interested in the Trades**

Being a pipefitter is a very physical job, so don't feel like you're not cut out for it if it kicks your ass every day for years. It's going to be a big part of your life. You're going to get up early in the morning and spend your day doing this, but that may sap a lot of your physical energy for the rest of the day. It may seem like more than just a job just because of how it will physically beat you up.

Be accepting of that. Be accepting of your physical limitations and don't feel bad — guys do the same thing. When they go home, the guys are tired too. And over time, you condition your body. Similar to when you join a sports team and the coach puts you through conditioning, you have to get your body used to doing this work. It could take years.

Unfortunately, a lot of people will self-medicate because they feel so tired and worn out and sore sometimes. My advice is to be kind to your body and hopefully don't rely too much on the self-medication, which can actually make things worse more than it will help you.
Remember that even though this seems like the last bastion of maleness out there in the world, even though this is one of the few careers where men still feel like they have the foothold and that they can act any way they want to, they’re still humans. As a group, they might be a little tough to break through, and you might feel intimidated, but these guys have moms and daughters and wives and sisters. For the most part, they’re good people. They’re not all a bunch of Neanderthals, even though it may seem that way sometimes.

I leave my phone number out there and my door open to any new tradeswomen who want to talk, even if they just want to ask themselves questions out loud and have somebody be listening. Don’t forget that you felt that way when you were coming in, and always be that for the next sister.

A lot of the women that become tradeswomen and excel have this fierce, independent, stubborn streak. That doesn’t always lend itself well to a lovey-dovey sisterhood or camaraderie and all that. Women in the trades often feel like they don’t need anything. They can get out there and kick ass on their own. So for women who are coming into the trades, I would ask them to try and look past it. And that’s based on the fact that it took me a while to look past it, that it was such a revelation when I finally did and realized what an asset, what a beautiful thing it is that we have each other, that we help each other and give each other advice and support. I love it so much when I get to work with a crew and there are other female pipefitters, seeing how they approach things from their angle and observing how they work.

Ending Gender-Based Harassment

Thankfully, I haven’t personally had to bump up against too many harassment issues. I can’t explain why I haven’t had the experience of receiving negative sexual overtones or advances or anything like that. I don’t know what it is that makes any man think that he could act or talk like that to any woman.

The thing I’ve noticed most is that some guys still resent that they have to be mature. They can’t have their naked calendars or talk like a bunch of pigs anymore because women are around. And I still sense some resentment. For some reason, they really don’t like the idea that they have to act a different way because there are different people on the job. I remember one of the first times I really noticed the resentment was when the men on a site were told that they couldn’t write whatever stupid things they wanted on the bathroom walls because we were sharing the bathrooms with them. I remember that being a big point of contention with them — they wanted the freedom to draw disgusting pictures and say disgusting things on the bathroom wall. For the most part, we don’t have to use the same portajohns anymore. Ironically, I think part of why it became so common for women to have our own bathrooms is because the people in charge don’t have to police that.
For some reason, men will tolerate the worst things about other men, and women don’t tend to tolerate as much. There are more women in the trades, so people are having to deal with us more. For better or for worse, we’re here, and there’s nothing they can do about it.

Construction is getting to be more professional overall. Safety is becoming a much bigger thing. There are a lot more protocols — you have to have more specific items like PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), and you have to do safety talks and programs. Overall, construction is elevating and getting to be more legitimized. Even though we have been legitimate, it used to be a lot more ragtag. I see the whole thing elevating more, and I’m glad that sisters in the trades coming up now get to experience that.

**Looking to the Future**

I’m excited that in 10 years, when I turn 60, I can draw my pension from my Local. It’s like I can see it now. I still hope to do this as long as I physically can. I’ve already had this conversation with people where they let me know when you get to be a certain age, you have to think about what other viable things you could do.

I like labor studies, and I like the idea of learning how unions work and hopefully being involved in that. We’re scheduled to have our international convention next year, and I’d like to maybe try and be one of the first women to represent our local union. We have one of the biggest locals in the country, and we send upwards of 50 men every year, but we’ve never sent any women. I think it’s time that I put my hand up and say I’d like to be one of the first women to go. That could lead to some opportunities in some way.

I’m still an idealist. I still love the idea of unions and would love to promote that and further that for workers in the future. It took me a long time to even recognize what I was involved in, the power of being in a labor union. It was simply a job for many years. I understood that I had my card and I was a part of the group, I was making a pension and had my insurance covered in a group plan and all that. But it took a long time for me to come around to the idea of how powerful it was that the trades unionized 120 years ago and at the same time, it’s never a concrete thing. It’s a living, breathing thing that we have to grow. The companies would love nothing more than not having to deal with us being unionized. Every generation has to keep the union alive.
Celebrate

Come celebrate with me,
I’m on a path that I never thought I would be on.
A path I thought I wasn’t good enough for.
A path I thought I wasn’t smart enough for.
And a path that I thought I wasn’t strong enough for.

Come celebrate with me
a new beginning,
a path I now know that I can walk through
because
I am good enough,
I am smart enough,
and I am strong enough.

by Estella Jaramillo
(TOP/Literature For All of Us book group member 2014)

Inspired by Lucille Clifton’s “won’t you celebrate with me”
Getting Started
I grew up in Chicago, on the southeast side in Hyde Park, and I still live in Chicago. I went to college at a very small liberal arts school in Iowa and studied art. After I graduated, I moved to the east coast and lived in Vermont for three years. My degree is in Art — I was a potter in college and did ceramics. I had a summer job in Vermont, and a guy I met there got me into a full-time job where he worked for a ceramic artist who had gone to RISD (Rhode Island School of Design). She had her own business selling gorgeous platters and other works at places like Barney’s for hundreds of dollars. I really appreciated my time there and liked it, but I was making $12 an hour. She guaranteed $1/ year raise, which was great, but I had no benefits. I was only 23 years-old when I started working with her and stayed for a few years. I just wasn’t getting anywhere. I felt broke; I had no benefits. I realized I was going to be 26 soon and would be moving off of my parents’ insurance. I was thinking about what I was going to do, and right around that time my dad’s health took a turn so I moved home to help out my mom who was not yet retired. I moved home in 2014 and helped out with my dad for about six months until my mom retired. Then I started looking for jobs. I babysat my whole life and got a nannying gig pretty quickly through family friends for the summer.

My mother was an electrician for 25 years. She got into it in the automotive industry. It was a little different than your typical electrical apprenticeship now. She did it through the auto industry and then tested into the water reclamation district. She was a journeyman there and then a foreman and then tested her way up to become an assistant master mechanic. So she’s got this background in the trades, and when I moved back from Vermont, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I was looking after my dad and doing pottery classes just for my own benefit. My mom said, “Well, you like working with your hands doing pottery. Why don’t you think about a trade? You can get good benefits and get paid well to work with your hands.”

I started to take tests for different trades in January 2015. I applied to carpenters as well as plumbers that year. I sat for both tests, the carpenters test in March and the plumbers in June. Along with applying to the two unions, I had started taking the Technical Opportunities Program pre-apprenticeship class at Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT). I’d already applied to the plumbers, and one day when I was at CWIT, the Program Director at the time, Linda Hannah, told me, “You’ve got to meet these plumbers who are here.” So I met some of the women in the plumbers union right before we tested. The sisterhood in the community was so tight-knit, and they seemed so passionate about what they were doing that it made me very excited to do that.

The carpenters got back to me about a month before the plumbers, and when I heard from them, I decided I was going to wait to hear from the plumbers. When I heard back from the plumbers, they wanted me to join, so I said bye to CWIT at that point. The whole point of the TOP class was to help women test into a trade. Since I’d done that, I went and started my apprenticeship and I loved it. I still, after five years, love it.
Learning on the Job

I love being able to learn something in a book and then being able to apply it to what you’re doing on a job site. It’s nice to be able to see the two — to go to school during the week and see what we’re learning on paper, and then to go to work and be able to ask the foreman and journeyman that I work with all the time, “So I’m learning this in school. Is that right? Is that how you do this?” Many tradeswomen will tell you what you learn in school is not necessarily what they do on the jobsite. I’ve learned to kind of tiptoe around it when something happens differently than I learned at school. If you go into work and tell the guys, “That’s not how we do it in school,” they’ll say something like, “Well, fuck you.” Asking it in a more roundabout way like, “So why do we do it this way?” or “Why are you doing it this way versus this other way?” works better. It’s all about how you approach them.

When I was a first-year apprentice, if I didn’t know how to do something I’d say, “Okay, I’ve never done this before. Would you do it this way?” and give them a template. Then they could say, “Yeah, I do it like that,” or they’d say, “Oh, I’ll show you,” and would give me a tutorial. The first time I was going to use a circle saw, which is a big circular saw and definitely a little scary to use for the first time, I told them, “Listen, I’ve never done this before,” and they helped me.

I remember as a first-year apprentice being very particular about how I did everything. I remember being very nitpicky about how I did X, Y and Z; it had to be perfect. I’ve been in the trades five years now, and you realize it’s not going to be perfect all the time. There are certain things that, yes, you have to get as close to perfect as you can, numbers-wise. But there are other scenarios where it’s just not realistic. I feel like when you’re a first-year apprentice, you don’t think about where you might have a little wiggle room. You’re just focused on it has to be the way it has to be.

It’s one of those things you don’t know until you have the experience. When I was a new apprentice, I was so worried about making a mistake. I was so worried about messing up. Over time, you realize that everyone messes up, and you realize that it’s okay to mess up. You don’t necessarily want to “own” that you messed up with pride, but you realize everyone messes up.

It’s so infuriating to see specifically very young male apprentices that fuck up and don’t want to say anything. From the get-go, if I messed up, I would tell you I messed up. You would see me beat myself up about it for a long time, and I’d be visibly upset about it. Now I’m at the point where if I mess up, I’ll say, “Yeah, I fucked that up.” And most people will be like, “Yeah, it happens to everyone in one way or another.” It’s just one of those things where you don’t want to make a big money mistake.

I remember as a first-year apprentice I was worried about speaking up for myself. If I was getting snarky sexual comments from someone or if I was not getting the hands-on experience that I wanted, I was shy about speaking up. But I feel very, very lucky to have had the foremen I’ve had. They’ve given me the hands-on experience I think I needed to learn my craft. I was with three foremen over the course of my first year, and they were really good to have as a first-year apprentice. I’d have conversations with my foreman when I was on my first new job site. If he was going to have me do something, he would ask, “What would you do here? How do you want to do this?” We would talk about it, which was nice, but he also let me struggle a little bit, too, which I always think is good because it teaches you how to learn for yourself.
I remember busting my butt as a first-year apprentice. At the first job I was at, I was the one who'd go get the cast iron pipe and cut it. The other guys would be in the ditch, I'd go get it for them, and they'd put it together. By doing that, I learned a lot. You don't just wake up knowing how to do this. That first job was good practice for me.

Had I been someone who lollygagged or someone they always had to wait on a very long time, I might have been laid off at some point. I think they saw the hustle. If they set you on a task of doing something boring like moving material or sweeping the floor, yeah, it sucks. I remember doing things like shoveling stone from a pile into a dumpster that's right next to it because they didn't have a machine there. I've done shitty things like that thinking, Fuck, this sucks. But you also need to know you're cheap labor. You don't exactly need to earn your place but you need to get the task done. You're the cheapest one to do it, so you just do it. And I think the reason I got to ask questions to my foreman or bring up issues I had so early on in my career is because they knew I was a hard worker, and they knew I wanted to learn.

The most important thing is proving that you're a hard worker.

If they see you busting your ass, they'll notice that. They'll notice if you did a lot of manual labor and got it done in one day. They'll notice if you finish sooner than they thought you were going to. That day I shoveled stone literally from right next to a dumpster into the dumpster, it was raining, and it took me hours. I will never forget that day because before I did the shoveling into the dumpster, I was shoveling the stone into a wheelbarrow because it was an existing building where they were sawcutting the floor. I was shoveling stone into the wheelbarrow outside, wheelbarrowing it inside, and backfilling the pipe. And it was pouring rain the whole time.

I changed clothes three times that day. I went to work in one pair of work clothes, and at break time, I got so cold and was soaking wet, so I changed. Then, to drive home at the end of the day, I changed one last time into dry clothes.

But I had to backfill the pipe that day, so I got it backfilled. Then they told me they didn't need the stone anymore so I needed to shovel it in the dumpster. It sucked and I was soaking wet but I didn't lollygag. I finished at around 12:30pm, and they let me go home early and paid me for eight hours. You don't bust your ass for nothing. If they see you busting your ass, they will notice and let you learn.
I Release You
By Edith Guerrero
(TOP/Literature for All of Us book group member 2013)

I’ve always been afraid of you
You’re always in the back of my mind
Every time I want to do something new,
try something new, there you go
always putting fear of failure in me,
but today it’s different
I’m ready to leave you, say good-bye to you
I’m taking my life back
    my life back
    my life back
    my life back
You no longer live in me
I have proved to myself that I can and will succeed
Everything that I’ve done,
you’ve been there right next to me,
but finally today I have the courage to
say good-bye
    good-bye
    good-bye
    good-bye
I no longer live in fear of failure
I will succeed as a woman
I will succeed as a mother
I will succeed with my children
I will succeed with my family
I will succeed in my job
I will succeed in my life being a tradeswoman
Today, once and for all, I say
good-bye to you

Inspired by Joy Harjo’s “I Give You Back”
Everybody has a dream when you’re a kid — you want to be a cop or a lawyer or a scientist or whatever. My dream was to go to a historically black college and then go to the military. But I had a very controlling father who didn’t believe in women in the military, and didn’t want me to go away to a college that was too far.

I went to college in Illinois at Southern Illinois University for about two and a half years. I was pretty much on academic probation the whole time because it wasn’t really something I wanted to do. I dropped out, got into some trouble. I like to say I created a colorful background for myself. After I dropped out of college, I started doing odd jobs.

I happened to walk into the unemployment office one day, where I picked up an old flyer for Chicago Women in Trades. The orientation had already passed, but I called anyway, and they told me to come in. The lady was very generous and let me in the program. I thought I wanted to try being an electrician, but I didn’t like that, so I tried bricklaying and fell in love with it. The rest is history.

It’s fascinating to see that you can create something and hundreds of years later it’s still there. I might never leave a mark by being famous, but I can leave my mark right here in the work that I do. I like knowing that I’m keeping somebody out of the cold or that I’m helping somebody be able to come get an education by building schools or cathedrals or restoring old buildings.

I’ve been a bricklayer for a little over 15 years, since April 2005. For 11 years, I worked for pretty much one company. When I worked with them, I was the only female and the only Black person. Ninety percent of the time, they would hire other people of color, but they wouldn’t last long. I think I probably had a better relationship with the owner than I did with my co-workers, but I found a way to communicate with them to be able to get the job done.

Then I started getting into safety. My boss bid on a job in Washington, DC, and they needed a safety supervisor to be present for our company. He asked if I was interested in starting to get into the safety side of things, and I said, “Sure.” I started taking all these courses and certifications and became a safety manager/safety supervisor, which led to me teaching very briefly. I was at our apprenticeship school, teaching some OSHA safety classes and scaffold training classes — I taught those classes on Saturdays, when the guys didn’t want to work. I tried to get a full-time position, but they didn’t really want me there.

Memorable Days, Memorable Lessons

Jackie Townsend
Bricklaying Instructor & Pre-apprenticeship Instructor • Age 40 • Hammond, IN
They thought I would be better working at Job Corps, which is a program for a lot of disadvantaged youth, most of whom are Black and brown. I guess they felt like I relate to the youth better, which ended up being great because I do think I’m in the right spot. The Job Corps instructors before me did not look like me and did not relate to the students; there was no progress with the students. Since I’ve been here, we’ve had the highest rate of getting students jobs with the trade they trained in. So now I’m just an instructor. I teach with Job Corps and also teach the Technical Opportunities Program at Chicago Women in Trades.

I teach bricklaying and safety courses, but we also do a lot of personal development. I teach interpersonal communication skills to the students. I think that’s the number one thing I start out teaching: self-worth and self-motivation. Then we get into the bricklaying. I teach all those things first so that they’ll have a better appreciation of what they’re doing and a better appreciation of themselves. That’s why I think where I’m at is the exact place I was supposed to be.

The results that I see from my students make me tear up. I cry about it, and I get excited about it. I see some of the students I had when I first started that are doing very, very well in the trades. They call me and send me videos of how they’re doing, pictures, thank you letters.

I can’t lie: the bricklaying part is the fun part of the teaching, but to be able to teach them some life skills and some things that they will take with them forever and utilize throughout the rest of their lives, that’s really what I teach. I consider myself to just be a motivator, and I’m able to motivate bricklayers.

My students will brag about me when they work. They’re like, “Yeah, my teacher is a girl. The teacher is a girl. Yeah, I was taught by a girl.” They get a kick out of it. When I’m teaching, they’ll record me and tell me they’re going to show the video to the slackers at their job. I enjoy it. I get a kick out of that, too. This is just my little piece of me leaving my love — a little stamp on Earth.

I’ve had a few particularly memorable days as a bricklayer. The first one was when I fell off the scaffold.

I had just started my second year, and we were about to start the day. The shell of the building we were working on was up, and we were laying brick on the outside of it. Instead of using the ladder and climbing up the scaffold on the outside, we would go through the building, go up to the third floor, climb through the window, and step over onto the scaffold. Well, I’m short, and my legs aren’t that long. I stepped over the window opening, and I thought I had my footing planted with my first foot, but when I stepped over again with my second foot, I wasn’t planted — and I fell.

There were some planks that were supposed to be overlapping, but they weren’t. Underneath those planks were some rebars that were sticking up that weren’t safety covered with any rebar caps. I fell and got stuck right in between the planks. As I went down, it shredded my jeans right off of me. I was dangling from the planks in my long underwear, three stories up. I almost got impaled by the rebars.

That could have been a really, really bad day for me, and for everybody. I was a little bruised once they got me down. I stood there for a minute, and then I literally collapsed. I couldn’t even stand up. I just fell on the floor because I had pretty much thought I was going to die. I cried for a few minutes and then took about an hour to get myself together. They asked if I wanted to go home or file a report, but I didn’t. I just wanted to go to work. I was thinking, *Fuck it, I’m going back to work because I’ve got to get over this fear. Now I’m scared of this motherfucker.*
After I fell, they went and found a ladder that they should have had in the first place. So I climbed back up the ladder and got up on the scaffold. I was just shaking while trying to work. The owner came out and called me back down. He recommended I go to the doctor just to get checked out, which I did. I filled out an accident report and went to the doctor. I was okay, just shaken up and a little bruised. I stayed home for about two weeks after that to get myself together. My boss told me, “Once you’re together, come back to work.” So I went back to work two weeks later.

Another memorable incident working on a job was when I was the only woman and the only Black person on the entire job. There were about 200 men on this job. I was paired up with a carpenter to do some cleanup and fixing up some things, doing what’s called a punch list.

The whole time this white guy was throwing real fucked up comments towards me like, “Oh, so how’d you get into the trade? What, the yayo wasn’t working out for you?” I’m wondering, What the hell is “the yayo”? After doing a little research, I found out that yayo means crack rock or drugs.

I asked him, “So are you asking if I was smoking it?” He said, “No. You weren’t selling it? It wasn’t good enough for you?” I said, “Dude, I don’t know nothing about that. I’ve never sold drugs in my life. What are you talking about?” Then he asked, “So where are you from? Do you live somewhere on the south side of Chicago?” I let him know that I wasn’t from the south side, that I born and raised in Aurora and Naperville.

He continued to throw these shady remarks towards me, so I told my union steward, who’s a white guy. My union steward then talked to the superintendent, who’s also a white guy. The superintendent asked, “Do you believe her? Do you think she’s trying to get some money?” My steward told him, “No, I believe her. She’s been with this company for a long time, and I believe her.” I also told the owner of the company, and he asked what I wanted to do. Just like when I fell off the scaffold that day, I let him know I just wanted to work. He said, “Okay, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of you.” After making sure I was okay with it, he moved me to a new job site.

Another incident involved the foremen that worked for us. I used to have long dreadlocks, and then I cut them off and had a fade. The foreman asked me, “What are you doing? You cut your hair off. You look like a fucking guy. I’m not gonna go for this shit.” I told him, “I’m here to work.”

His response was, “Well, you can’t come back to work unless you suck my dick and bring me Dunkin Donuts coffee.” So this was another situation where I told the company owner. The owner pretty much put the guy up for public shame — he had to repeat what he said to me and apologize to me in front of our entire crew. He tried to say he was just joking. I knew he wasn’t. He’d thrown out stupid remarks like that before, and I’d just overlooked them. But this time he was trying to mess with my money. I’ve got tough skin. I can tolerate a lot of shit, but now you’re talking about my money. I reminded him that he’d really said a couple of things about me looking like a guy or being a guy and that he talked about sucking dick.
Once again, my boss asked how I wanted to handle it. I said, “I just want to work.” He told me, “Okay, he’ll be out of here.” A week later, the guy was fired. I still have a relationship with my boss from that job. If I wanted to go back to the field right now, I could. It’s just a matter of picking up the phone.

Those are three very memorable moments.

I do a lot of reading. I’m into my history and my heritage, and I got interested in bricklaying from that point. You can talk about the Egyptians because that’s one that they put in the history books, or we can take it back to the Moors, which they don’t put in the history books. But these are things that people of color did — we were builders, we were doctors, we were scientists. These are the things that we created. Bricklaying became a form of art. It’s a skill that not everybody can do, no matter how hard some of us try. That’s what caught my attention. Everything we do, people steal it from us. This was a way to take back what was stolen from us and to pass it down to people that look like me, so that they can appreciate it the same way I appreciate it.

I tell people: the pay is the bonus, but to be able to get back to something that originated from us, it gets you thinking about all the other things that originated from us, and it gets you to appreciate who you are. I think that’s the reason I do it — it goes way deeper than a paycheck.
Mural (Full + Segments)
Artist: Jessie Orellana, Journey
Level Bricklayer & Olga Drozdova
The Unknown Woman, 2021 (Collage on paper, 12” x 9”)
Artist: Robin Dluzen, Apprentice Painter
Yes, We Can!
by Sandy Navarro-Colon
(TOP/Literature for All of Us book group member 2016)

When we walk onto a project, ready to work, there will be people betting on us to fail, with hopes of us going back to being “clerks”

Yes, We Can!

That moment when you carry a 75lb, 16’ piece of wood all by yourself, and they stop and stare, like stiff little books on a shelf

Yes, We Can!

Inspired by Luis J. Rodríguez’s “¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!”
I grew up in the south Chicago suburb of South Holland, Illinois, and now I live in a neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. Me and my sisters were the first generation born here after our parents immigrated from the Philippines and got their citizenship in the late 80s.

I wasn’t socialized or raised to be in the trades. I don’t have any family members in the trades. Everyone thought I was crazy when I decided to do this. They thought it was dangerous; they thought I was going to die. My family wanted me to become a nurse. I told them I didn’t think I would do well being a nurse. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I think what my family wanted for me was not what I needed, and it was hard for them to understand that.

If someone enters a world that their family doesn’t personally understand, their family may think it could be risky and that the person might end up having a bad life or end up in a situation where they’re not able to care for themselves long-term. And those are real-life concerns. I could’ve gotten really upset about that, or I could just accept reality for what it is and understand why my family felt the way they felt. And they did feel that way, but now they’ve moved to be supportive of me.

I first got into the trades when I got fired from my job at a grocery store. My roommate at the time was working for a builder who needed a cleaning lady, so the same week I got fired, I started working for her boss at the builders. I started out cleaning some houses they were building, and then I just kept doing more. I guess I turned into a laborer. He kept giving me more to do and I just kept doing it. Alright, I’ll carry these bricks. Alright, I’ll carry these pallets. Alright, I’m going to carry these loads of plywood. Alright, let me drag this lumber over here. Let me cut this over here. Let me paint that wall.

I kept doing what he asked because I wanted to keep trying new things I had never done before. Whenever I was given a task, I never felt like I couldn’t do it. I also like to feel helpful, so if I go to a place and I’m not performing, I feel awful. Even if I’m surrounded by a bunch of guys, I’m not going to slack. I’m going to actually push myself harder because I don’t want to be the weak link.
So I kept doing everything the builder asked and realized I was pretty much a laborer. Then I found out that there’s a bunch of other skilled trades. I looked up Chicago Women in Trades to see how I could get into a skilled trade and see what I liked. I went through the Technical Opportunities Program (TOP) at Chicago Women in Trades and then got my apprenticeship one year after I finished. While I was waiting to begin my apprenticeship, I went back to working for that builder, and things got bad. I liked my old boss, but he had some family issues that kept interfering. The business was set up with their office connected to their house, and every day we had to go over there, there was some new catastrophe going on. It was confusing, and it was even dangerous sometimes. That’s why I really appreciate the union conditions that go along with collective bargaining because I don’t have to deal with stuff like that anymore. There are other issues that you deal with on a union job, but I don’t have to deal with that.

Now I’m an ironworker. I finished my three-year apprenticeship a couple months ago in the spring of 2020. I’m mostly a rod buster, which is basically doing rebar and tying with a tie wire. We install the rebar, and then another trade comes in and does the concrete. It’s basically the frame that gives the concrete its strength and form to be able to hold all the weight and pressure from the building. Rod busting is the most physical aspect of ironworking. You do the most carrying, and it’s really hard on your body.

When I was starting out, I got really excellent advice from women at Chicago Women in Trades. I also happen to work with really good women in my trade. Every once in a while, I get to work with another woman, and I’ve had a chance to work with a really cool woman who’s worked at my company for a while. She’s an excellent rod buster, so working next to her was very, very good for me. She encouraged me, first of all, so I got lucky in that respect. The other thing is that she’s good at her job, so I saw how you can handle this stuff as a woman. She would give me advice — she told me how to lift certain things because we don’t have the same amount of upper body strength as men, so we have to find ways to compensate. The tips she gave me were really helpful. I’ve also gotten a lot of good tips from smaller guys that I work with, and those physical tips really saved my back a lot. The physical stuff is number one for any woman wanting to work in the trades.

Having situational awareness and starting to think about things from a mechanical perspective is very important to developing your understanding and furthering your skill set in the trades. The more you can understand what’s going on around you on the job site with total logistical perspective, the further you’re going to go.
Sculpture Art
Artist: Lauren Svedman, Apprentice Boilermaker
Personally, as a woman, I was never socialized to think of things with an engineering mindset or with an analytical mind. Those were conversations men would have in my family with each other but not with their daughters or their sisters. If you as a woman are able to go onto a job site and read prints and understand what’s supposed to happen, it will help you. You might not necessarily be running the work, but you could. Those types of abilities related to being able to run work come from understanding the details of the job, how to do it fast, how to do it safely, and how to make the company money.

I’m really lucky that the guys I’ve worked with have been really good to me, too. They’ve taken the time to talk to me and have taught me a lot. I’ve heard about other women who have had really hard times learning things. I have never had a problem getting someone to teach me something, and I’ve been really fortunate in that sense. I think being a girl can help. If you have a willingness to work and a willingness to learn, it can take anybody really far. If you’re a girl, you’re less threatening. A lot of these guys would be super-macho, misogynistic, triggered by some other guy being in their space. They’ve got this feeling of almost protectiveness toward me sometimes as a girl. But they’re not threatened by me, and that’s a big difference when someone’s asking for someone else’s help or teaching.

For women to succeed in the trades, they definitely need persistence. Very independent-minded women do the best because they will ask for help only after they’ve exhausted every other resource and they know for sure they can’t do it on their own. That helps somebody master skills faster than someone who’s constantly asking for help. Unfortunately, women also have to be a little bit more politically savvy than men. There are certain politics that go on in some locals, and your reputation really does follow you. I think it can be worse for women than for men. I think a guy could be a real bag of shit and still work consistently. But I think if a woman gets that same kind of reputation, she will have a very hard time getting jobs. We don’t want to bow down, but at the same time, we still have to eat. It’s a balance of getting where you need to be to in order to be effective and then picking your battles wisely. Everyone’s going to piss you off here every day, and it’ll get to you until you learn to get really, really thick skin.

People will say horrible things around you and to you all the time. They’ll say them about everybody — about your friends, about someone you’re working right next to. They don’t care. If someone says something extremely racist, I’ll just say, “No,” and shake my head at them. You’ll hear racist stuff on a regular basis, and sometimes it will be so often that you can’t explode every time because you’ll literally never get any work done. You’ll never get any work done, and it’ll be impossible for you to find ways to work with the people around you because it’s so tough. What some people try to do is not talk about politics at work. If they know that’s a spot that hurts their heart, then they know they can’t go there at work. Those are things that you have to think about ahead of time on your own because those moments will come up.
You also have to know when to stand up for yourself. There are times to be cool, be zen, and let it flow. And there are other times you just have to lose your shit on a motherfucker. Sometimes people are so disrespectful and will scream at you and call you stupid in front of everyone on the job site. That’s a time you have to fight back.

It’s not uncommon to hear people screaming like that at apprentices all day long because there’s a little bit of a toxic work culture, and I also think people just enjoy being assholes. It’s also a little bit of a testing ground because the trades are still majority male. I think men have a different way of talking and communicating with each other and testing each other in these ways. It’s not necessarily anything that I’m used to, but in observing it, I realized if someone talks shit to me, ignoring them is not the right thing. I have to talk shit back, and that’s the right answer because after I talk shit back, now they respect me as an equal. Whereas if I’d said nothing, they would have seen me as weak. So the right answer is different than what women were taught. It’s guy culture. There are certain direct ways of expression that men are conditioned to have versus women.

When I first entered the trades, I really wanted to learn how to weld. Even though I don’t normally weld at work now, I know how to do it. In my free time, I’m starting to think about different creative projects. I would like to see how far I can take my construction knowledge in creating some other ideas I’ve got kicking around in my head. It’d be interesting to see if I could become a contractor myself one day. Maybe I’d be really bad at business, who knows. I’m willing to give it a shot because I’ve got some ideas that I’d like to explore. What I really am most hoping to get out of the trade is seeing what I can do with my own hands.

There are some tradespeople who are also activists. I’ve got this interest in construction and development, and this other side of me that cares a lot about clean water and pollution and equal rights. I’m not the only one. There are a lot of people involved in the construction industry who want us all to find better ways to do it. We’re not threatened by the idea of a loss of jobs. We see an opportunity to do things better, and we hope to be a part of a way of doing things better instead of contributing to doing things destructively.

What Is a Pipefitter?, 2006 (Mural)
Artist: Sarah Joy Liles, Pipefitter
Hard-Hatted Women
by Aleanna Mason
(TOP/Literature for All of Us book group member 2015)

Hard-hatted women stand up even when their backs hurts, and when they’ve spent their entire day in the dirt.

Hard-hatted women raise kids and cook meals, but they also spend their days amongst iron and steel.

So to all my hard-hatted women that have paved the way, I’ll think of you as I look at the creations in the city every day.

From the concrete to the gravel, to the marble on the counters and floors, thank you hard-hatted women for opening those doors.

Inspired by the book “Hard-Hatted Women: Life on the Job,” Edited by Molly Martin
Shun P. Battles
Electrician Journey person • Age 39 • Country Club Hills, IL

Back in the day, I used to watch Tom & Jerry cartoons and would notice how Tom always stuck his paw in the socket and got electrocuted. I was curious about that. What was it like? How did that work? How did he stick his paw in there? And growing up, your parents always say, “Do not put your finger in the electrical socket. Do not stick anything in there.” I may have put the two together and realized what my parents were talking about was the same thing from the cartoon. But I still didn’t know why you couldn’t put your finger in there. So I was interested in understanding what electricity was.

Five years ago, I was doing something totally different. I was doing data entry, processing payments for the government for child support. I’m the type of person who gets bored with things after a while. I realized after a while at the data entry job that sitting at my desk was not working for me — the monotony of just sitting at the desk and punching keys every day had gotten boring. I always figured if I got into the trades and didn’t like it, I could go back to my previous work. Sometimes you have to step out on faith and attempt different things.

I heard about the pre-apprenticeship training program at Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) because a young lady I knew was talking on Facebook about how she went through the program. I looked up the organization to see what it was about and saw that on Tuesday and Thursday evenings you would go in to the program, and at the end you could do the basic apprenticeship tests for the trades.

So I was like, You know what, self? Let’s just go give it a try. It was like I was working a dead-end job, in essence. And I could always go back to it. What would I be losing by just taking a chance? And here I am five years later, still in the trades.

When I started the pre-apprenticeship training program at CWIT, we met for twelve weeks of the class on Tuesday nights, Thursday nights, and Saturdays during the day. At the time, I worked on Saturdays, and my job didn’t want to give me Saturdays off. So I stepped out on faith with the support of my family and quit my job to pursue becoming a tradesperson.
Going through the CWIT program was a challenge in itself. For example, even though I had done the math you need for the trades tests, I hadn’t done that math in a very long time, and I needed the refresher I got through CWIT. All of the teachers were knowledgeable, and I had a good experience. I really enjoyed the fact that every Saturday we got to meet local tradeswomen and get hands-on with the different trades.

You had people like myself coming in who wanted something different or new in our lives, but we had no idea what an electrician or plumber actually did. Everybody knows about electricians and plumbers because we have lights and plumbing in the house. In the CWIT program, we were introduced to trades like sheet metal workers, carpenters, painters, and things like that, including some of the trades most people know absolutely nothing about. Saturdays gave us the hands-on experience so we could experience a trade a little bit to say, “Yeah, I like that,” or “No, I don’t think that’s for me.”

I think CWIT is a great tool for helping women get into the trades. It’s a good refresher on the things you will need for the trades apprenticeship tests. Of course, the pre-apprenticeship program is not going to teach you everything in twelve weeks, but it will help you and guide you in the right direction.

In my experience, what helps women succeed in the trades is hard work and dedication. But that’s true in anything. Just like in any other job, what makes you successful is coming to work every day, working hard, and dedicating yourself to your craft as much as you can.

I’d advise any woman interested in getting in the trades to put yourself in a position where you can compete physically. A lot of times you get to a job and they just look at you and assume because you’re a woman or you’re female you can’t carry this or you can’t do that. So my advice is to get yourself into good physical shape where you can compete and you can carry your own weight.

I also suggest finding a mentor if you can — someone that’s in the same trade as yourself who’s been through what you’re going through. A mentor can help you with experiences you have, or if there are things you’re afraid to ask at work, you can talk to your mentor outside of work. I didn’t have a mentor, and I think that my experiences and my knowledge would be different if I’d had someone to talk to and bounce things off of. If I’d had a mentor, I could’ve asked how they did this or that. I would’ve talked with a mentor when I couldn’t figure things out. Sometimes if you ask too many questions on the job, it’s frowned upon.

A lot of the guys act like they were born knowing how to do their trade. They have an attitude like they were never taught anything and never had to learn anything. That kind of mentality makes you hate to ask questions. A foreman once said to me about another guy who was an apprentice, “Yeah, I don’t like him. He asked too many questions.” And in my mind, I was wondering, How was he supposed to learn?
If you have questions on the job, you ask the questions. No question is a stupid question. You may have to just find one person you're extremely comfortable with and talk to that person when you have a question. When I was starting off, I had a lot of journeymen and others who didn't want to teach me anything. I had a few that would teach me little things, but a lot didn't want to. That's something you may have to experience and deal with as a woman.

When I was an apprentice, someone was lecturing me about not knowing how to do something. I told him, "Hey, I don't mean to cut you off. But you're either gonna teach me or I can find someone else to, because us having this conversation is not gonna teach me." He just paused, because he understood my point that we're either going to spend 40 minutes talking about why I should know this or we can spend the 40 minutes teaching me.

That's just the culture and part of it. You're responsible for your own learning and your own success. In reality, you really shouldn't have to be — that's the whole purpose of the apprenticeship. But sometimes you have to take things into your own hands.

I can only speak for myself, and luckily I haven't experienced any sexual harassment or anything like that. But I have experienced discrimination just based on my skin color and gender, although it's without them saying that directly. It's a hard pill to swallow. Sometimes you have to sit back and realize that it's not right, but this is the field you chose, so you have to learn to deal with it to a certain degree. You have to grow a thicker layer of skin. I've never had any blunt upfront discrimination, but it's there.

As a woman, you have to be mindful of what you say and how you say it, because your male counterpart can say the exact same thing that you say without the same consequences. Even if you're not yelling but a man is yelling back at you irately and belligerently, you'll be labeled the bitch. You have to be extremely careful and mindful of what you say and how you say it, and say it at the correct times.

I've had to teach myself over time that everything is not worth the battle. This is how I view it: if I have a conversation or something happens with someone and it doesn't alter my spirit or the way I feel, I can let it go. But if I feel some way in my spirit or I just can't stop thinking about it, then I have to address it.

There have been situations where I let things go because it annoyed me at that second but it's not that big a deal to me. At work and anywhere in life, I try to pick and choose my battles because everything isn't worth it. A lot of times you find yourself pissed off, and after work the person you're upset with is not even thinking about you. The other person said what they said and moved on from that, but you're still holding it. You find out that it makes you resentful.
Stained Glass Artwork
Artist: Kimberly Mladinic, Carpenter
I really haven’t had a problem with homophobia. I don't go around with a sticker saying that I have a wife and I'm gay, because other people don’t walk around with a sticker saying they’re straight, right? But what happens is that whenever I’m in a situation where we have a conversation about our lives, for some reason everyone wants to know, “What does your husband do?” That’s a question that I just don’t understand for the life of me. Why does that matter?

One guy asked me what my husband did after I told him I was married. I said, “I don’t have a husband.”
HIM: “You said you were married.”
ME: “Yeah, I have a wife.”
HIM: “That’s okay. That’s okay.”
ME: “I wasn’t asking for your approval, but she’s a flight attendant.”
HIM: “Oh!”

I don’t walk around with a badge on me, but when it’s brought up and they say “husband,” I correct them. However they take it, is how they take it.

There was one guy I told I had a wife, and you could tell it freaked him out. It was evident that after I said that his whole demeanor and everything towards me changed. He kind of distanced himself from me, and I was okay with that. Because if you can’t accept me for who I am, then I don’t need you around me. I’m not going to say I have a husband for the sake of appeasing you.

If we have any work events where we can bring a plus one, I’m not bringing a husband — I’m bringing a wife. With that being said, I’m going to tell you I have a wife if you ask now. If you don’t ask and we go somewhere, then you’ll just meet her when we’re there because she’s who I’m bringing. You’re not hiding who you are; I shouldn’t have to hide who I am.

I had one day that made me realize that no matter how hard you work and whatever it is that you do, it’s just a good old boys club.

I don’t remember how long I’d been an apprentice, but I had been working and they were giving me high praises on everything I did. They told me, “You’re a good worker. You’re a hard worker. You’re going to be around a long time.” Pretty much everyone I work with, 90%-95% of them are white males. So one day, this new guy comes along. He’s one of my favorite people at the job — this guy that I’m talking about — so this is not a negative knock at him, the situation just happened with him.

I was on the job before this guy, and when it was time to make cuts, meaning they send people to other jobs because they were downsizing, they sent me away but not this other guy. The thing is, I was given all the high marks and everything like that, but they kept him because of who his dad was.

That made me realize that it doesn’t really matter how hard you work and things like that. You’re just a number. If they want to keep their friend — and their friend might not be as good as you — but if their friend needs a spot, you’re going to go.

And I’m glad I had that experience early on in the trades. I’ve been in for about five and a half years, and that happened my first or second year, so it taught me early. And that’s a good experience, to me. I think a lot of tradeswomen have to learn that you’re nothing but a number when they get into the trades. That’s what you are. You’re only as good as what you can produce and what you can give to the company at the time. Because the minute someone comes in faster or stronger or whatever it is that they need, and they do the job a little bit better and faster than you, you’ll be the first to go. You have to realize that there’s no loyalty unless you’re family or you’re really good friends.
That experience affected me in a way to where it’s like I said, I’m nothing but a number. I’m going to go to work every day, I’m going to give you a solid eight hours to the best of my ability, and I’m going to move forward. It’s not that I’m not working hard — I go and I give a solid eight. But the thing is, I know that I’m nothing but a number to you. If something happened to me today, you’ll have someone in my spot tomorrow. So I’m not going to give you all my time, all my energy, when you’re not going to put that same energy in and give it to me.

You can’t allow a job to dictate your everything. That’s what it taught me. When that experience happened, I felt like, Oh, wow, that’s how that works? Now when things like that happen, it’s no big deal. That’s part of it, and I don’t expect anything different. That’s why I go to work and I do my part, but I do enjoy myself in my life, too. You have people that work six, seven, ten years and haven’t been on a vacation. Why? They feel like they can’t miss work; they need this. I tell them, “Shame on you. The job could care less about you.”

My first year, a guy who was on the job I was on would work crazy overtime. I would do some overtime during the week and every other weekend. This guy asked me, “Shun, I don’t understand it. You’re a first-year apprentice, and you’re not working all the overtime? I’m going to get all this overtime.”

I told him, “I have a wife and kids. I have a family. I’ll do every other weekend and some days during the week, but that’s it. That’s enough for me. Because I don’t live to work. I work to live. So I’m not going to do that.” We had that conversation, and a couple of weeks later he passed away. And that resonates with me to this day about how important it is to have a life and not spend every waking moment at work.

You have to make sure you’re good because the company is going to always be okay. You have to make sure that you’re okay. Sometimes you need a mental break. And people don’t want to take a break. Why don’t you want to take a break? People will say, “You want to take a long weekend? I’ll be here every day.” I won’t. I love me a little bit more.

You have one life, and that is it. A company is going to continue to run long after you. You have to love you a little bit more.
I Have Decided
by Maggie Keeler
(TOP/Literature for All of Us book group member 2020)

My decision was to take control of my future
I feel powerful and strong
And a little scared

I will not let myself down, I cannot, there isn’t time
This feels more important than anything else
I have laser focus on my goals, I want it all
Some friends don’t get it, others have my back
That is okay, I understand
It is not their decision, it is mine
I am going to work my ass off and have a nice house
Where I feel safe, secure, and no one can take it away from me

These words will describe me, this is my future

Inspired by “Miles from Nowhere” by Nami Mun
A Change Worth Making

Eva Morelos
Journeyman Painter • Age 36 • Chicago, IL

I was in the restaurant and bar industry for about 10 years before joining the trades. Up to that point, my career was actually going great. I’m very good at hospitality — it came easy to me. I loved my customers and my co-workers, but there was something in me that needed a shift. I got tired of the repetitiveness of what I was doing. I really, truly just wanted something different.

So I was craving change and saw an advertisement for Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) from one of my friends when scrolling through Facebook one day. There was a post saying they were having a meeting that Wednesday at 4:30, and there was no obligation — you could just come and see what the program was about. I saw that, and something sparked in me. It sounded very interesting. I didn’t know what to expect, but I just knew in my heart that I wanted something different. I needed something different in my life at that point.

I went to the Chicago Women in Trades orientation and felt so empowered. They called up these tradeswomen just to show who they are. There were plumbers, sheet metal workers, iron workers — women from all the trades. They made this line, and I won’t lie, I knew then I wanted to be part of something alongside these badass chicks. I signed up for an interview and got accepted to the Technical Opportunities Program (TOP) which changed my life.

Every Saturday in the TOP program, you visit a different trade. I really loved that they didn’t tell you what trade to choose. They give you information about logistics, like how much money you’ll make, the length of your apprenticeship, and when you’ll get vetted. I had all these trades in front of me and got to see what they’re all about, as well as what their benefits are, and I could see which one fit me best. I went into the program with electricians on my mind, but the painters just kind of called to me. I found out they are paid the same as the electricians and that the painters apprenticeship was three years, while the electricians apprenticeship was five years.

They really prepare you emotionally because there’s a lot you’re going to have to take in. They let you know that they’re there for you and that you can fall back on your sisters. You realize that it’s needed. You need that camaraderie and access to women that have been through the same thing as you.
I was not around anyone in the trades when I was growing up. The main driving force for me joining is probably just seeing my mom work so hard. I’ve always had it in me that if I have a dream where I want something, I can go out and get it. I really got that from my mom. I had hard workers around me but no one in the trades. It wasn’t even mentioned to me. Where would I even hear that from? It feels like they want to keep the union trades a secret, like they don’t want everyone to know about the benefits and how much money they make. Like I said, I had worked in restaurants for a long time, and I was in a union in a restaurant where I was a server. I had amazing benefits for someone that was just serving cocktails, so I was well aware that the union was definitely the way to go, no matter what sector.

My friends and family were very supportive when I decided to join the trades. They are behind me all the time. My friends look up to me, which is kind of weird, but they tell me they do because I keep a positive outlook all the time and always work hard.

On a typical day, you start at about 4:00 or 4:30am (you can stretch it with the snooze button). That was a big difference for me, coming from bar management to being a painter. I used to fall asleep at 4am, and now I’m waking up at 4am. Your work day starts at 6am. You find out what you’ve got to do and then stay focused and make sure you’re contributing to the team. That’s my biggest concern personally, as someone that didn’t know anybody in the trades and kind of “came in through the back door” through CWIT. When I was in the TOP program, they told me joining the painters wasn’t going to be easy. Painters especially are very tight-knit; it’s very much generational. Everybody I work with is somebody’s son or somebody’s nephew. I’m working with family, and I’ve had to make my own reputation and show them who I am. In the beginning that was pretty tough, but I’ve built a reputation for myself as a hard worker. No matter what, I know I’m a hard worker, and that’s what I’m known as.

Thinking about my experience of building my reputation takes me back to the beginning of choosing the trade. You don’t choose your trade and boom, you’re immediately a painter. Oh no. The union meetings are where you start. As a painter, I had to attend union meetings, meet the head business agent, and show him and anybody else in that meeting that even though they didn’t know me, I was there now. I made a deal with my job at the hotel to be gone every other Wednesday so I could continually go to the union meetings. So first was proving myself to my BA (business agent). That literally took seven months. Seven months of attending meetings and volunteering with no type of pay. I spent my personal time helping the union in any way I could in order to show the people of the union and my local that I was serious. There were other girls that were going to meetings with me, and they lasted about a month or two. They decided to go somewhere else because it was a little hard to get into the painters.
I spent seven months proving myself while still working at the hotel and finally got told to call someone who was hiring. I'd proved myself to my local, but then I had to actually start my painting career. It was very tough at first because I had already gone through the seven-month-long process and then I had to show up somewhere where I knew nothing. I'm a heftier girl. I'm brown. I didn't know anybody there. They would tell me to go do something, and I would do it to my best ability, but I struggled. I had my foot in the door, but I didn't feel like I was getting a fair chance back then. They would work me a week, and then I'd sit for three weeks. I had just left my job at the hotel and went from having a regular income to having no income at all. I'd never struggled with money like that before. I know that I'm a hard worker, but I could tell they weren't giving me a fair chance. It wasn't easy. They would say that I was doing something wrong, but I was an apprentice, and no one ever showed me how to do it right.

I began in September 2017, and I was, for lack of a better term, being jerked around. My painter friends would tell me to leave the company. I had a big supporter in one of the tradeswomen in my union who told me what to do and how to get my foot in the door in the right way. She said before I did anything like quit the company, I should talk to the business agent. My business agent told me not to leave, and it kind of bothered me. They'd told him they were going to work me, so he told me to stay there. I'd begun my apprenticeship in September, and by May I had worked maybe two months. I was in a relationship at the time that ended horribly because there was so much uncertainty. I had no money and a lot of stress. Luckily, I got to finally go with another company for a couple of weeks.

This gentleman who ran a one-guy-shop needed an apprentice, and the head of the school told me to go. I could tell the shop owner was a little upset that I wasn't a man — which is to be expected. I had the attitude that I was there to show him I could do whatever it is he needed me to do. I'm happy to say that I was only supposed to work with him for two weeks and he kept me for two months. He wanted me back.

When the job ended, I started calling the first company that was jerking me around. They were the company that signed my intent-to-work form, so my school said I had to go back with them. The school said they understood I didn't want to go back there, but I told them it was fine and I'd go back as long as there was work. The guy that was jerking me around told my school that I'd said I didn't want to work, which was a lie. I was so upset. When I told my classmates and my teachers, they couldn't believe. They know me. They'd always seen me come to school religiously and do whatever I had to do. I'd spent more time in school than I had working as a painter at that point.

I told the head of the school that I'd never said I didn't want to work. The guy at the company wanted to sign up new apprentices, and the head of the school told him he wasn't going to let them bring in new guys if they still had an apprentice who wasn't working. So that's when I had to make a decision. The guy I'd worked with for a couple of months wanted me back. It made me feel good, but he was running a one-guy-shop — it was just the owner and me — as opposed to the company that had originally signed me up. They'd been really bogus to me, but they were a big company. Every time I told somebody I was signed up with them, people would say, "Wow, that's a good company." I had to make a conscious decision about what I needed and what I wanted in the future. Honestly, this one-guy-shop was nice, but I knew I could make a ton more money and would have a ton more opportunities with a bigger company.
It's very humbling. You have to suck up your pride. Because now I had to look this guy in the face who I knew had just told a bald-faced lie about me. I had to call him and be chipper: "Hey, I heard you might have work available." And he said, "Oh yeah, we do." Maybe he didn't know that I knew what he'd said about me. To this day, we just don't talk about it. From September until June of the following year, they hadn't given me much work. They didn't give me work until they wanted to hire the new guys (two were sons of guys who worked there). I refused to give up my spot, and I'm happy to say that after they hired me back, I worked almost non-stop until 2020.

I proved to them and myself that I'm very capable of learning. I have always been a hard worker, and I didn't have to tell them that. I was very quiet and just there to work. Luckily, I got in with a good group of guys who were very motivating and took the time with me. They saw that I was there to work, and I got a lot of compliments. Now they tell me, "Eva, your reputation is that everybody says you're a hard worker." I thank them, but I'm just trying my best. I'm not out here trying to be the best of anybody; I just do what I can. I'm here to help. I'm here to work and to make money.

I would tell other women entering the trades to keep your eye on the prize. If you're here for a purpose and the purpose is to work, then no matter what, you have to work. Unfortunately, you have to work harder than everybody else, but it's not a bad thing. I'm not only pushing myself for them, I'm pushing myself for myself. I never thought I'd be in a physical job like this where I'm lifting and moving up and down ladders. It's so physical, but I love it because I'm challenging myself physically and mentally. So the best advice I have for somebody is just keep your eye on the prize. Know who you are. Respect everybody around you, even if they don't respect you.

Even though you have your sisters to fall back on at the end of the day, when you're there at the worksite, it is on you. You have to remember that you are there to work. It is good money, and it is a good pension, but it is not given to us. This wasn't always an option for women. This is something we had to come into and create a door for ourselves. We have to work harder than everybody else, which goes into a lot of aspects of our lives but especially in the trades, because these guys already expect you to do the bare minimum.

I joined the painters union knowing the benefits of it as far as my health insurance, pay, and future pension. I used to be kind of a wild child, but I'm very calm now and realized I might be around a while and need to think about my future. I've always been kind of a hustler, so when I heard how much painters make and the amazing benefits, it was a no-brainer. No matter what, I can do this and stack my money. I've actually been off of work for the past few months, and I got into stocks. I'm learning how to grow my money, and if I can make my dream come true sooner than retirement, then I'll do it. As for now, I feel like I'll dedicate at least 20 years to the trade. Now that I've gone through this and finished my apprenticeship, I'm glad I made this move.

I have a dream that towards retirement maybe I'll own a bar or a restaurant. There's something in me that's drawn to hospitality. Having a bar where my job would be to make sure people are having a good time — that's me to the core. Until then, luckily with painting I get to use my skills of just being a real person.
I got into carpentry through a community organization called Sunbow in 1984, which was funded through the city to do pre-apprenticeship trades training. I was volunteering with a community organization doing rehab on the south side of Chicago, in really burned out buildings. A lot of the work was patching rat holes and other pretty basic stuff, but it made me think I could do construction. That’s what made me open to jumping in.

One of the people I was volunteering with had seen an article in the paper about women getting into union construction trades and told me I should check it out. It would have never come up on my radar — nobody in my family had ever been a tradesperson. So on the basis of that newspaper article and doing that work for the community organization, I found Sunbow.

At Sunbow, we had a choice of going into three trades: carpentry, painting, or laborers. I just fell in love with the carpentry part. I never really wanted to do either of the other two trades. I was fortunate to get into the apprentice program and went to Washburne Trade School for carpentry. I was 23, and I got a lot of support from my family. They’re not ones to say you shouldn’t be doing that, or anything like that. When I first got into the trades, my mother bought me my first circular saw. Even at the time, we didn’t need to buy our own power tools — the contractors buy the power tools — but my mother didn’t know that; she was just being supportive. And of course I used it, I certainly did. My family was always there and has always been supportive. I was lucky that way.

I worked as a carpenter for 11 years total, and then I was approached by one of my instructors from Washburne, who was then working as an instructor at the carpenters union. I thought I was applying for just a part-time night position, but it turned into a full-time teaching position. I taught for a little less than 20 years, and now I’m in administration with the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters Apprentice Program. It’s a good job. I’m still in the industry, working for the apprentice program with the apprentices. In the office here, we track their work hours and their classes and help get them through the program.


Advice/Insight to Success
Our most successful apprentices are very competitive people. You have to be, really. And you have to have some luck. A lot of people who play high school sports have that competitive spirit, and they have a lot of confidence. But if you don’t have it, you’ve got to get that from somewhere, because that’s what you need. You need to feel like you’re always competing with the other carpenters on the jobsite. You want to be the one everybody knows toward the end of the job. When things start to slow down, some people get laid off and some people get transferred to other jobs. You want to be one of the people who gets transferred to another job at the end of the job cycle.

If you’re a woman or a minority, you have to have support. If you have kids, you have to have support. We do have single mothers and single fathers as apprentices, and it’s hard for them. If you have ill family members that you are tasked with taking care of, you’re going to need support. The industry is not engineered to allow for families. It is geared toward the traditional, typical male who has a wife at home dealing with the kids. It’s always been geared toward that, and it still is.

To get to work every day with no interference, you need a decent vehicle. If you don’t have a reliable vehicle, you’re going to need some support. You can’t have any outstanding legal issues, because those legal issues come back to bite you all over again.

This is an industry that’s kind of up and down. The COVID pandemic is a perfect example. A lot of our apprentices were working just fine, and COVID-19 came and started slowing things down. Construction workers are considered essential workers, but the money starts to slow down. The companies don’t want to take on new projects. They want to finish a project that they were on and get paid for that, but may not take on new projects.

In the trades where there’s always little bit of up and down, you have to be organized to be able to continue to pay your bills when you’re not working. You have to be of the mindset that you’ve got to save money. We tell the apprentices they need to have at least three months’ rent or mortgage in the bank before starting to spend money. Those apprentices who take off and are working well are never looking for that cliff when the work will drop off. But the cliff is coming, and we tell them the cliff is coming, so they have to be a little financially savvy, as well.

I used to teach one of the first classes that the apprentices have. It was a labor relations class where you talk about the union, benefits, and what makes a good worker. In those classes, we try to set them up for success for the rest of their apprenticeship. We tell them, “You might be working now, but let’s assume you’re not going to be working in a month. Let’s see what you can do to save money.” More financial literacy would be better, but we do give them the basics.

Making the Way for More Tradeswomen
Contractors bid several jobs at a time, and they might have several crews. As one job is going down, they might have one or two jobs that are going strong or that are just getting started. As an apprentice, you have to make the foreman think that you make him money and that they’d hate to lose you. If they think you’re a good worker and you’re one of the people they want on their core crew, they will want to transfer you to another job with the company.

One of our main goals right now working with Chicago Women in Trades is to get some of our women apprentices on a core crew with a contractor. We want the contractor to be able to see the women and say, “That person should be on my core crew. I could take on a woman apprentice, train her, and transfer her from jobsite-to-jobsite.” We want contractors to start thinking about having women on their core crew. Then, they’d always be ready when they need to bid for jobs that have some basic requirements for how many city residents or women need to be on the job.
Getting on a core crew is almost the only way to ensure that you get the on-the-job training hours needed to advance in your apprenticeship. Without them, instead of a four-year apprenticeship, you could be in your apprenticeship for six or seven years. Unfortunately, that is a typical situation for women. Contractors don’t see them as somebody they want on a core crew; they see them as somebody who satisfies the requirements for this job. We need to make the contractors see that there’s a real value to having women on their core crew.

Chicago Women in Trades is one of those organizations that has been around forever, and they know you have to attack the issue from different ways, including working with the city to place requirements and goals on contractors to include women and people of color on jobs that they’re bidding on for the city. Once contractors see the direction of the city, state, and federal government making goals and requirements for public dollars that are spent in construction, then we can partner with the contractors and it’s more of a carrot — we’re going to help you, you’re going to help us, and we’ll get the job done.

**Women on the Job—Handling Harassment**

I have personal stories from way back when, but I also have stories of apprentices since I’ve been working here at the apprentice program. There’s not a lot of women even in our apprentice program, so they come to see me for help. I experienced harassment on the job, so I know exactly how it feels.

I’ve had apprentices that have told me some really rough stories. Some of them, you could tell a person was pushed to the breaking point. The harassment builds up, and you try to ignore it, but it builds up and fills you with anxiety that you don’t even realize. You have to watch out for people coming at you, and you feel like you’re always being watched. That’s something I know I felt when I was out there, and you hear that from women all the time. You stand out on a jobsite, so you feel like there’s no time where you can just work like everybody else. You feel like you’re always under a microscope. Everybody does something wrong at some point, but when you’re wrong, it’s an example of why you shouldn’t be there.

When I first got this job with the apprentice program, I actually had a contractor who asked me not to send a woman apprentice (which is very illegal). I’ve had contractors say that they did hire a woman previously and it didn’t work out, so they don’t want another woman. Gender-based discrimination is still out there — that part hasn’t changed. We hear from the apprentices that some contractors handle working with women better than others. The women apprentices will notice differences working with one contractor to the next. I’ve heard stories from women who worked for a contractor they were really happy with, and a lot of times it was after they had a bad experience.
It is good that the women have a positive experience and know that it can be different, that a job site doesn't have to be really bad or make women feel nervous about going to work. It's better if the good experiences become more the norm. There are laws that require anti-harassment training, and hopefully, some of that will start spreading through the industry and open people's eyes. And most of the guys who are not total assholes can get it. They might not completely turn over a new leaf, but they'll be more open and at least understand where somebody else is coming from.

There's hope — that's what I think.

Ending harassment and discrimination is another one of those things that has to be attacked from several different angles. One is when you enact a law like the state of Illinois did requiring anti-harassment training for anybody who deals with apprentices, which is going to give the contractors incentive to actually provide that training. Secondly, the more often our younger people come into the apprentice program and see women, the less it becomes a foreign idea. Thirty years ago, a woman in a class would have been unknown and unheard of; now, we try to start a class with at least two women in the class. If they don't become fast friends, they can at least give each other support. But it also lets the guys know that it's not that unusual anymore for women to be in the trades.

It has to be attacked in two different ways. From top-down with regulations. And from the bottom up, with people just getting used to having women on the construction site.
Dreaming Up a Blockbuster: Imagining Tradeswomen in Popular Media

From the Editor:
In preparation for interviewing the tradeswomen whose stories are featured in this collection, I began to think about portrayals of tradeswomen in popular media. Could I recall any TV shows, movies, cartoons, books, or music that featured tradeswomen? The only thing that came to mind was Jennifer Beals’ portrayal of a welder in the 1983 film Flashdance. That just didn’t seem like enough to me — I think we need tradeswomen’s stories everywhere! So when interviewing each tradeswoman, I asked the question:

If there was going to be a movie made starring tradeswomen, what genre should it be?

“It could be a little bit of action, a little bit of drama. Or make it a damn horror story, like Texas Chainsaw Massacre — a chainsaw is a piece of construction equipment!

Or I was watching a movie the other day called Like A Boss, with Tiffany Haddish. In the movie, these two women start their little makeup company, and it takes off. Maybe something like that, where you can get a few women from different trades, and somehow they all meet up together to put their creative minds together and become one of the top general contractors in the country. You’d see women training. You’d see women driving the big trucks on the job site.

Or just do a flat-out documentary, you know?”
— Jackie Townsend

“I think a drama and a romance.”
— Ingrid Wennerberg

“How about a rom-com about two tradeswomen in different trades that come together and find love? There’s a lot of meat there. You’ve got the aspect of being in the trades, you’ve got the romance, you’ve got the aspect of being gay. There’s a lot of potential there.”
— Pam Hamilton

“Maybe a sitcom, starring the person who does the Maintenance work in the office.”
— Kina McAfee
I would think it’s action. I would want something with an action feel to it, because it’s always something different going on. You never know what you’re gonna get day to day. And then you have women in the trades one day, the next they’re gone. You know, the physicality that comes with the things that each person has to endure in the different trades. I would say action, because you never know what’s coming the next moment.”
— Shun P. Battles

“I know this is gonna sound really bad, but I think it would make for a really great movie if there was a group of friends and a couple of them were tradeswomen, and they decided to rob a bank. Think about it. We know how to use a grinder — that gets you in half the places... I don’t know. That would be pretty cool, though.”
— Rhea Rashad

“It would probably be Drama. 100%. Because the drama in these jobs, amongst the guys and their own personal relationships with each other. Big time drama, like Days of Our Lives. I’m just trying to keep up, it’s juicy!”
— Eva Morelos
RESOURCES

Tradeswomen’s Organizations

- Chicago Women in Trades, Chicago, IL – Career Training & Support (cwit.org)
- Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Employment for Women (ANEW), Seattle, WA – Home – ANEW – Apprenticeship & Nontraditional Employment for Women (anewaop.org)
- Central Ohio Women in Trades, Lima, Ohio – HOME | womeninthetrade
- Missouri Women in Trades, St. Louis, MO – Home | Missouri Women in Trades (mowit.org)
- Nevada Women in Trades, Las Vegas, Nevada – Nevada Women in trades (nevadawit.org)
- Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), New York City, NY – Nontraditional Employment for Women (new-nyc.org)
- Northeast Center for Tradeswomen’s Equity, Boston, MA – About the Program – Build A Life MA
- Oregon Tradeswomen Inc., Portland, OR – Welcome to Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc.
- Tradeswomen Inc, Oakland, CA – Tradeswomen – California organization for women in the trades
- Women in Nontraditional Employment Roles (WINTER) – WINTER 2020 (winterwomen.org)
- Vermont Works for Women Vermont Works for Women | Job Training Programs | Women & Girls in STEM | Women Empowerment (vtworksforwomen.org)
- West Virginia Women Work WV Women Work – WV Women Work |
- Women in Construction, Biloxi, Mississippi – Women in Construction (moorecommunityhouse.org)

On-Line Resources

- Chicago Women in Trades – "We Heard the Call" – YouTube
- Chicago Women in Trades – "Give Tradeswomen a little RESPECT" – YouTube
- Chicago Women In Trades – YouTube
- Participants-Guide_2014_lowres.pdf (womensequitycenter.org)
- Trade Women Chat | Facebook
- Pride and a Paycheck – Pride home page (prideandapaycheck.com)
- Tradeswomen Build Nations | Facebook

Book Group Resources

- Literature for All of Us (Chicago, IL) – www.literatureforallofus.org
- Hard-Hatted Women: Life on the Job Edited by Molly Martin
- Miles from Nowhere by Nami Mun
- Corazón by Yesika Salgado
- Becoming by Michelle Obama

Additional Reading

- We’ll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction by Susan Eisenberg
READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

We hope that you’ve enjoyed meeting the tradeswomen whose stories and art fill these pages! Here are some questions crafted by Literature for All of Us to help you more deeply engage with this book. We invite you to grab a few friends (in person or meet up virtually!), read together, and use these questions to discuss your thoughts, feelings, and reactions.

1. Are there any stories shared here that really stood out to you? Which ones, and why?

2. Reading through each story, we are able to witness that person’s journey to becoming a tradeswoman. If you are on a path to working in the trades, what has your journey been thus far? Why did you decide to try out the trades?

3. Did any of the stories change your perception of a particular trade? If yes, how so?

4. Based on the stories you read, what qualities seem important for someone to have success in the trades? What qualities do YOU possess that would contribute to your own successful career in the trades?

5. This book includes stories from people who are still in or just finishing their apprenticeships (Paris Finley and Laura Doligosa) to folks who have been in the trades for decades (Jackie Townsend, Kina McAfee, Pam Hamilton, etc.). What things in the trades have changed over time? What has stayed the same? What are things you hope to see change during your time in the trades?

6. What is the role of sisterhood for women who are in the trades? Do you feel it is important for women to seek each other out? Why or why not? How have you found or created support as you move through the trades?

7. Many of the tradeswomen stress the importance of proving that they are hard workers. What do you think about this? How does being a woman impact this?

8. Do these stories bring up any fears or concerns you’ve had about joining the trades? If so, which ones? What skills and/or advice do you use to navigate your fears and concerns?

9. All of the women interviewed had different attitudes toward how to handle discrimination or offensive comments within the trades. Laura Doligosa shared: “You also have to know when to stand up for yourself. There are times to be cool, be zen, and let it flow. And there are other times you just have to lose your shit on a motherfucker.”
   - What do you think of Laura’s strategy? What kind of situations might call for being “cool”? What kind of situations call for “[losing] your shit”? (NOTE: There is no right or wrong answer to these questions. Everyone will have a different tolerance.)
   - Laura’s approach is just one way to deal with discrimination. What is your personal attitude or strategy towards dealing with discrimination and offensive behavior in your workplace?
10. What is one piece of advice shared throughout these stories that you will carry with you? What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever gotten before beginning a new experience?

11. How did seeing photos of the tradeswomen you were reading about (and others) affect your reading experience?

12. What artwork were you most taken with? Why? What does the artwork included in this book tell you about tradeswomen? Choose one piece of art in the book and talk about (or journal if you’re enjoying this book on your own!) what that art makes you feel or think.

13. Edith Guerrero’s poem is entitled “I Release You.” What is she releasing in this poem? Has the fear of failure ever gotten in your way of achieving or trying something you wanted to do? What has helped you overcome this fear?

14. Turn to Maggie Keeler’s poem “I Have Decided,” and re-read it.
   - Have you ever made a decision like the one Maggie describes in this poem?
   - What does it mean to you to take control of your future?
   - At the end of the poem, Maggie describes herself and her future as “Secure. Capable. Knowledgeable. Strong.” What words describe your future self?

15. How do you ready yourself to take on a new path (you might think of a new career or any potentially life-altering decision)? How do you know you’re ready to make a change in life?

16. If there was going to be a movie made starring tradeswomen, what genre should it be?