

CIRCUITS *continued*

## Women Finds Career in the Trades after COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has hit the tourism and hospitality industries particularly hard, leaving cities like New Orleans with sky-high unemployment rates among the women who make up the majority of workers in those sectors. But opportunities await those women in another field with higher wages and benefits to boot: construction.

"If someone doesn't know what they want to do in life, they should join the IBEW or any other apprenticeship," said New Orleans Local 130 apprentice Grace Kluesner in a webinar that accompanied the release of a report on women in construction in the New Orleans area. "Being paid to learn a skilled trade that you will use and profit from throughout your life is much better than trying to figure out what's next in a minimum wage job without good benefits or the skills to get you a better job."

The Institute for Women's Policy Research released a report earlier this year on the economic effects of COVID-19 in New Orleans, focusing on women, one of the hardest-hit demographics. In a city known for festivals, live music and a vibrant entertainment culture, the pan-

demical lockdown cut deep into the financial fabric of the city, and a lot of those cuts disproportionately affected women. According to the LA Workforce Commission, the New Orleans metro area lost close to 57,000 jobs in 2020, with over 40% concentrated in leisure and hospitality. The industry isn't expected to recover for several years.

A union construction job is good for anyone who can do the work, but it can be particularly beneficial for women, especially those who are the main breadwinners in their households. In New Orleans, that accounts for more than three-quarters of homes with dependent children.

"When women make smart choices to pursue high-demand, high-wage jobs, it's transformational," said Nunez Community College Chancellor Dr. Tina Tinney. "It not only changes the quality of her life, it changes the quality of her family's life, and it changes generations behind her."

The fact that women working in female-dominated industries make less than men in male-dominated fields isn't unique to New Orleans. IWPR reported that being a woman, especially a woman working in a female-dominated occupation compared to a man in a male-dominated occupation, is much more predictive of earnings than educational attainment. For those women who do enter the trades through, the payoffs are there, if at a cost.

"On a construction site, a woman stands out brighter than a 1000-watt metal halide lamp," said Janelle Dejan, a Local 130 member since 2001 who also participated in the webinar. "There was no switch for me to flip to turn off my skin color or gender so I had to just test the water one day at a time. But I'm very satisfied with my

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decision to step out of my comfort zone into a nontraditional career path."

While that path may not be common for women, it's not for lack of interest, says Kluesner. Women will stop her at the grocery store after work, while she's still in her boots with her safety glasses holding her hair back, and ask her what she does. One woman approached her outside a Walmart. Another actually entered the apprenticeship after Kluesner told her how.

"These women stopping me were interested enough to have a conversation with a complete stranger. How often does that happen?" Kluesner said. "And it wasn't until hearing that I also began with their same lack of knowledge and experience that they realized it was a real opportunity they could pursue too."

With typical "women's work" jobs predicted to recover slower than jobs in the skilled trades, it's a good time for women to consider a career change. But knowing where to look and what options are out there isn't necessarily straightforward.

IWPR noted that after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans adopted a charter school model to rebuild the public school system and in doing so eliminated career and technical education classes in favor of an emphasis on college preparation. Removing these opportunities can have real consequences for women. Kluesner herself says she was encouraged to take the college route, but eventually decided to pursue other opportunities.

"I quite literally Googled, 'How to be an electrician,'" said Kluesner, who works for Barnes Electric and will top out this October. "Here I am five years later, having grown in knowledge and character, hopefully, but also my bank account."

Kluesner was able to avoid racking up student loan debt while learning a trade that pays her a living wage, something that appeals to all kinds of people. But they have to get in the door. And they have to know that there is a door for them to open. "So many men that I work with are electricians because they 'didn't' know what else to do," so they simply became a tradesman like their dads or other family members. For women, when we're unsure of what we want to do, working in the trades is not our, 'whatever, I'll just do this for the time being,' fallback option. But it could be! And it should be if the interest is there. Each woman I have met in the trades is here because we chose to be here. Not because we didn't know what else to do."

As for how to get more women to apprenticeships, IWPR recommended increasing high school programs and pre-apprenticeships, setting gender and diversity goals for public projects, and ensuring that women have the support they need, which includes addressing issues like childcare and reliable transportation as well as things like women's committees and anti-bullying training.

In 2000, when Dejan walked into the Local 130 office to apply for an apprenticeship, she knew she would be one of very few women in the classroom and on the job. But she did it because she believed the benefits would be worth it.

"I was willing to contend with being

in the minority for the opportunity to receive equal pay, structured advancement from apprenticeship to journeyman status, and the ability to earn money while being trained," Dejan said. "I thought I was going to have to be strong and brace myself for the worst, but it turned out it wasn't nearly as bad as I imagined. My co-workers and the contractors I worked for always treated me with respect and equality."

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That's because the IBEW fosters a strong dynamic between apprentices and journeymen, Dejan said.

"We were a team and my advancement was a reflection of their ability to train," said Dejan, who is now an electrical instructor with NOTEP, a local trade school that works with high school students and young adults interested in the trades. "Clear-cut expectations and standards of what makes a good apprentice and journeyman took precedence over gender."

Dejan says she's seeing more and more ads promoting women in the trades and the variety of opportunities that await them, especially in a place as historic as the Big Easy.

"New Orleans is a city that's 300 years old. We have a lot of historic buildings here. I love to get my students to think about what it took to build them, how they function to serve residents or businesses, and how long the buildings have endured," said the New Orleans native.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the IBEW and others to recruit and retain more women, Local 130 Business Manager Paul Zulli says some contractors still need to come around. Three of the local's largest contractors have a fitness for duty test that requires a person to lift 75 pounds in order to get hired, something women can struggle with.

"I am very disappointed that we do all we can to encourage women and high school girls to apply to our program only to have these contractors erect this unnecessary barrier," Zulli said. "We can bring them in and send them to school, but most can't go to work for those employers."

Zulli says the contractors who use the test claim it's to make sure their employees are healthy enough for the job, but only new hires are subjected to it.

"If they honestly cared about their employees, then everyone would have to take this test, but they don't," Zulli said. "As a former general foreman, we put our members on several different tasks based on their ability. We wouldn't put a member in a situation where they will be lifting

materials, tools or equipment that would cause injury."

Such a questionable requirement doesn't just hurt women either. Zulli says it can also disqualify older members with years of experience. And if someone fails the test, they have to wait three months before they can take it again.

"What are these people supposed to do in the meantime? I have members who are looking to get out because they can't work for some of my biggest contractors, who have the most work to offer."

That work is going to have to be done by someone. IWPR noted that before the pandemic, construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing jobs were estimated to increase substantially by 2026. And the 2019 Greater New Orleans Jobs Report highlighted the need for a pipeline of workers for jobs in these fields, as they've grown more than four times as fast as overall employment in the region, leading to skilled worker shortages — which will likely only get worse once the aging workforce starts to retire. While the pandemic has slowed some projects, the Building Trades Council in New Orleans noted that, as of December 2020, there were no signs of retrenchment of major commercial construction projects.

There will always be people — women and men — who simply aren't cut out for a job as an electrician. As any member can attest, it's hard work. But if Kluesner and Dejan's stories are any indication, there are a lot of women and girls who can in fact do the work. And that helps them, their families and their communities, not to mention the trades.

"I love learning new things as an electrician," Kluesner said. "I was just telling my foreman that I think what I've learned from the IBEW apprenticeship, in skills and as a person, will take years to reveal and realize. I'm continuously learning new things each day that can be applied elsewhere and it builds my confidence and self-reliance." ■



Janelle Dejan, a Local 130 member and electrical instructor, credits her IBEW apprenticeship for fostering a strong relationship between apprentices and journeymen that took precedence over things like race and gender.