

Women in the Trades

An interview with Connie Ashbrook and Nora Mullane

Liza: How did you first get involved in the trades?

Nora: I first started in the trades through a carpenters' apprenticeship program in 1979, in Ohio. Came to Oregon and worked here in the apprenticeship program for about four and a half, five years. And within the Union for probably another four or five years following that and then went out on my own as a general contractor doing small remodeling projects and home additions.

Connie: That experience as a carpenter gave you the credentials to apply for the City jobs. And you were very influential as one of the first women to get into those positions.

Nora: When I started in my apprenticeship program in Ohio, I was the only one. They weren't really sure what to do with me. When I came to Oregon, there were a couple of other women in the carpenters' apprenticeship program. My first job, which was working on the I-205 exchanges, big bridge work and construction and concrete form work for those...the big walls and the platforms and everything. There was one other woman on the job site. And it was wonderful, you know, that I had one other female face. I mostly did heavy construction and bridge work in my program, because that was a lot of what Union carpenters did out here. I worked on the KOIN building and a lot of bridge work which was really tough.

Liza: Physically difficult?

Nora: Physically very hard. The skills I learned during my apprenticeship program of getting on the job site and just

doing what you had to do that day and forcing yourself to have confidence in yourself, helped me then be on my own working. And taking on new jobs that I'd never done before and saying, oh sure, I can do that. And then going home and quick-studying up whatever I could to figure out: how do I build a cabinet?

The work in the Union and the heavy construction had a whole different set of challenges in terms of being alone, being in a male environment, having it be such hard work, physically, and for quite a while being in that alone setting. But then we organized, through a lot of Connie's work and others...other women in the trades by a group called Oregon Tradeswomen Network, which became kind of this tremendous support, psychologically for going back out every day, even though you were in this, sometimes, not-friendly environment. But knowing that you were part of a larger community of women who were all trying to do this and make their way.

So then working on my own and knowing after a while in that kind of work that I couldn't go through my entire work history as a carpenter. I worried about how my body would hold up. So then I applied for a job at the City of Portland and became a building inspector. And was a building inspector for quite a number of years before I went into management for the City. But then I was kind of in that same situation again of mostly in a male environment and working out in the field with mostly males, the contractors, almost exclusively. Again, having to kind of make my way. There were more women hired as inspectors. So eventually it didn't feel quite so alone. There was one woman there before I was. So I had some sense of camaraderie.

Liza: As a woman, were the challenges significantly different when you were working in the field of construction than when you were working for the Bureau of Development Services?

Nora: I think the difference might have just been that the City was more subtle...in terms of my co-workers, because there

was more oversight and more...I was part of the Union program there as well. And I think there was more education and care and support in that environment, but still people who did not like that I was there. I never felt so much difficulty out in the field, on the job site where I was doing the inspections. There was just a little bit more of it in the office environment.

In construction, it could be pretty blatant, unpleasant and scary, and bewildering. [I remember] multiple times someone saying to me, you are taking the job from a man. And when I was younger, I was bewildered by it. That didn't make any sense to me. And I had to grow into a better understanding of gender inequity and struggle.

I did have terrific people too; lots of great folks that I worked with and was very appreciative of their willingness to be alongside of me.

Liza: Can you tell me a little bit about how you got started?

Connie: Very similar experience to Nora. 1979 or '78. I didn't go to college. I'd been working waiting tables. A friend of mine was going into a crane operator job. She suggested that I check out working in construction. I thought it sounded interesting. But I wasn't sure if I could operate heavy equipment. So she told me about a dump truck driving, pre-apprenticeship program that was going to be run by the Department of Labor. It was short-term, five weeks or so. I learned how to drive an off-the-road dump truck, and on the road too. I worked for about six months, maybe seven. Most of the time that I worked I was out in Eastern Oregon straightening out a section of Highway 26 between John Day and Vale. I'm a city girl. It was quite the experience to be in Eastern Oregon and living in a little, tiny campground in one of those campers that fit on the back of a pickup. It was wonderful and exciting and scary all at the same time.

I got laid off from that job. I'd gotten into this network of women who were working in the trades, just through word of mouth. I heard about another pre-apprenticeship program helping women learn to be carpenters. Like Nora, I worked on the I-205 interchange system, the I-205 to the airport. I still get a thrill when I go down this beautiful, curving off-ramp from I-205 to the airport. It was really exciting to see that come out of the dirt, from just flat dirt to all the pillars and the decking and the support systems and the barricades. I worked with my team to build all these wooden concrete forms that then were filled with concrete and paved with this bridge. I loved that part of it, to see the results of your work every day and to work with a team.

I had similar experiences with Nora with my team. They had mixed feelings. Sometimes they accepted me as a coworker, we enjoyed each other's company, and we got things done. And we laughed and had fun. Other times they were bewildered and didn't know what to do with me, or how to talk around me or act with me. So I was very lucky, I had a great foreman, Joe Cogan. He was tickled to have a woman apprentice. He liked to teach. I liked to learn. So it was a good match. He taught me as much as he could. The weird thing was that he started talking about how if two carpenters would get married they'd make a lot of money together. He just kind of...I believe he was teasing me. He knew that it made me uncomfortable to have him say these things. But anyway, it did make me...I didn't know how to handle it. So I just kind of ignored it. But it did get to me after a while.

So then, the recession hit of the early 80s, like around '81 or so. I had gotten laid off from the bridge. It was done, basically. So I enjoyed being laid off for a while. But then I was ready to go back to work and couldn't find work. As carpenters at that time – it's still true today – you get your work by going to a job site and asking the foreman to hire you. So this is a really scary process because you go to these

huge jobs, you have to find the foreman and you have to ask them for work. You're supposed to go there dressed for work, with all your tools with you and look like you're ready to start right that minute. And you're supposed to go early in the morning. So I did that to a lot of jobs. I kept being laughed at. I mean, Nora is tall. I'm very short. [chuckles] And so, I think they took her more seriously as somebody who could be a carpenter. I think they were not quite sure about me. I mean, there were plenty of small guys, my size, working as carpenters. But I'm 5'3"...5'2" and a half, 5'3". But just this image of this little woman coming on the job asking for work, they laughed at me. It was very discouraging

So then a friend of mine... Again, this is very typical for construction, most jobs are gotten through word of mouth. So a friend told me about a job, it was similar to apprenticeship but not quite apprenticeship that was opening up in the elevator constructors. So I went and applied at the Union and applied at my company. So I had to do both. I had to be accepted by the Union and accepted by my company. So if there were no apprentices on the out of work list, then my company could choose somebody.

They had never hired a woman before and they were not sure about hiring me. The General Manager said, well, we need to have a woman for our job because it's federal money, so we're considering you, but we're not sure if you could do the work. One of us thinks you're too small. So we went in the back of the shop area where they had these heavy...they called them rails that elevators ride on inside a building. Elevators are sort of like building a little train inside of a building and instead of going horizontal, it goes vertically. So it has tracks and wheels that hold the elevator on the tracks and a lot of machinery and motors. So we looked at these rails. I had been weightlifting. And so I knew I was strong enough to pick that up. I said, I'll pick up this end if you pick up the other, because I was pretty sure that two people always lifted

this thing, because it was a couple hundred pounds. They had suits on, and it was dirty and greasy. And so they said, no, no, that's alright. We believe you. And they hired me. [All laugh] So I like to say I got my job because of affirmative action, but I kept it because I was good at it.

Connie: My first job as an Elevator Constructor was installing the elevators at the Justice Center, then I worked a year installing at the KOIN tower, and from there I went to the VA Hospital installation. Worked there for a year. And then I got into the Service Department. Two years after that I passed my mechanics exam and got my license. And then I had my own service route that went around the area servicing and repairing elevators and escalators. My customers had to get used to me as a woman. They were good. They would say, oh good, the girl's here. Now it's going to be fixed right. That was very flattering. We took turns doing trouble calls at night, if something broke down and had an emergency fix. So I still ran into maintenance department people or building owners that would look at me and were like, whoa. I'm not sure if she can...Can she really fix my equipment? They offered to carry my toolbox up the stairs. Because if the elevator is not working, you have to take the stairs up, however many stairs, to the mechanical room where the controls are. So I would laugh at them and I'd say, no. My one arm is longer than the other, so I have to carry it to even myself out. Just make some kind of silly joke.

Liza: What are the barriers that you see as the largest impediments to more women working in the trades? Has that changed over time?

Connie: It has changed. There's triple the number of women than there were. It starts young with girls being told girls don't do this. Then in middle and high school if you don't take the math or the shop classes. And then if your neighbors and friends and family don't think to say, oh hey, this is great summer job being a carpenter's helper. It would be

perfect for you. And so you accumulate those information, experiences and money that all positions you to take the next step and rise through the mostly invisible career ladder in the trades. It's not something they teach in high school. They're starting to teach more about apprenticeship. But most high school counselors and people that are providing career information will only know about college jobs and only teach about college jobs.

So the barriers of knowledge, experience, preparation, self-confidence which comes from all those messages that say that women can't do this work or shouldn't do this work. Then there is the barriers of less money for a decent car, less money to buy tools, greater family responsibilities and then the bias that...both overt bias and unconscious bias. Oh, what's a little lady like you doing...thinking about doing this kind of job? Don't you want to be a secretary? So versus, oh, we don't want you here. You're taking a man's job. So those are two attitudes.

But we have seen a big difference. It helps a lot that the economy is better. During the recession women were laid off earlier and more often, and not hired more and dropped out more. Now that that recession is over and there's a building boom, employers are really scrambling for women. At the same time, the people making hiring decisions, the foreman, superintendent, project managers, well, more of them are women. Women have risen through the ranks. More women have gone to engineering school. And they're project engineers on construction sites. So they're influencing their colleagues and also making hiring decisions. Most male construction workers have now worked with competent women construction workers. Not all. There's still companies that refuse to hire women. But on most big jobs there's at least a couple women that are great workers and great co-workers.

And men were raised by the feminists of the 70s. So many more men are accepting of women's place in the workplace and

authority and leadership and competence. At the same time, with Title 9 passing in 1972, more women got access to athletics where they could be become physically strong and do those physically challenging things, so that they were more ready, physically, for the heavy construction work.

Liza: Oh, that's a really interesting connection. I hadn't thought about before.

Nora: That would totally be my story. Because I went to college Title 9 had just...Well, the first year, it wasn't there. And the second year it was there. And I was on the rowing team. And it was like the first time I really was like strong. It was like, wow, this is great. I love this. So the physical part of being in construction, I liked it. It was hard work. But I liked it. And I knew my body could do it. That was, really, a confidence builder.

You know, my own story about that was I had finished college but moved home afterwards. And I was sitting, looking, knowing I can't just live at my parents' house without doing something. So looking for work and saw the ad for the apprenticeship program. I didn't have a clue, anything about it. And my dad came home from work that night and I said, so Dad, what do carpenters do on the job site? We kind of talked about it a little bit. And then I just said, is that something I could do? And he paused and said, yeah. Yeah, you could do that. And I, forever, am grateful to him to be open to the idea. Because it was really what then gave me huge confidence to go do the application process.

Liza: In closing, is there anything else that you would like to add or you would like to share with our readers?

Nora: My own regard for my work in the business was valuable and important to me, as a person. I like to think that other women have that opportunity, because it's been a huge basis of who I am to have overcome obstacles, worked hard, accomplished

big things and made friendships and relationships with people who initially weren't sure what to do with me. And finding the good there was an important part of my life. And breaking down those barriers and having people know that anybody could do this job if they're able to put some muscle. [And] the financial benefit of it and being covered by a Union that makes sure everybody is paid equally was huge...a huge thing when I was starting...all those years ago.