

# IF I HAD A HAMMER

Program prepares women for the trades by Natalie Shapiro

**A**nne Galisky was 5 years old when she got her first carpentry tools.

Now, she is a successful carpenter and general contractor. She attributes her success both to her parents' support at an early age and to a six-month Portland Community College program called B-FIT.

Building Futures in Industry and Trades teaches students the skills they need to become carpenters, masons, electricians, welders and more. Although open to all people, the focus is on women and minorities.

Unfortunately, B-FIT is in danger of being dropped because student enrollment has been declining during the past few years. "Right now, we only have five students, and there have been less than 10 over the last several years," lamented Dean Kruse, dean of science and technology at PCC's Rock Creek Campus.

B-FIT began in 1989 as a means to help women become ready for entering the trades. It originally was funded through the federal government, but once the grant ran out, the college had to pick up the costs.

"Originally, there was one staff member for three students," Kruse said. "But now the teachers have to stretch themselves doing other jobs."

B-FIT courses teach students the basics in the construction, electrical and mechanical trades. The program also offers a circuit weight-training course to build the strength needed for these jobs.

"You don't have to be as strong as the men, but you have to be as strong as you are able to," said Galisky, who graduated from B-FIT 10 years ago. The program allows women to catch up and gain the skills many entry-level men have.

Galisky said the instruction teaches students about the construction culture. "Trades are a different language—this is an introduction to that language."

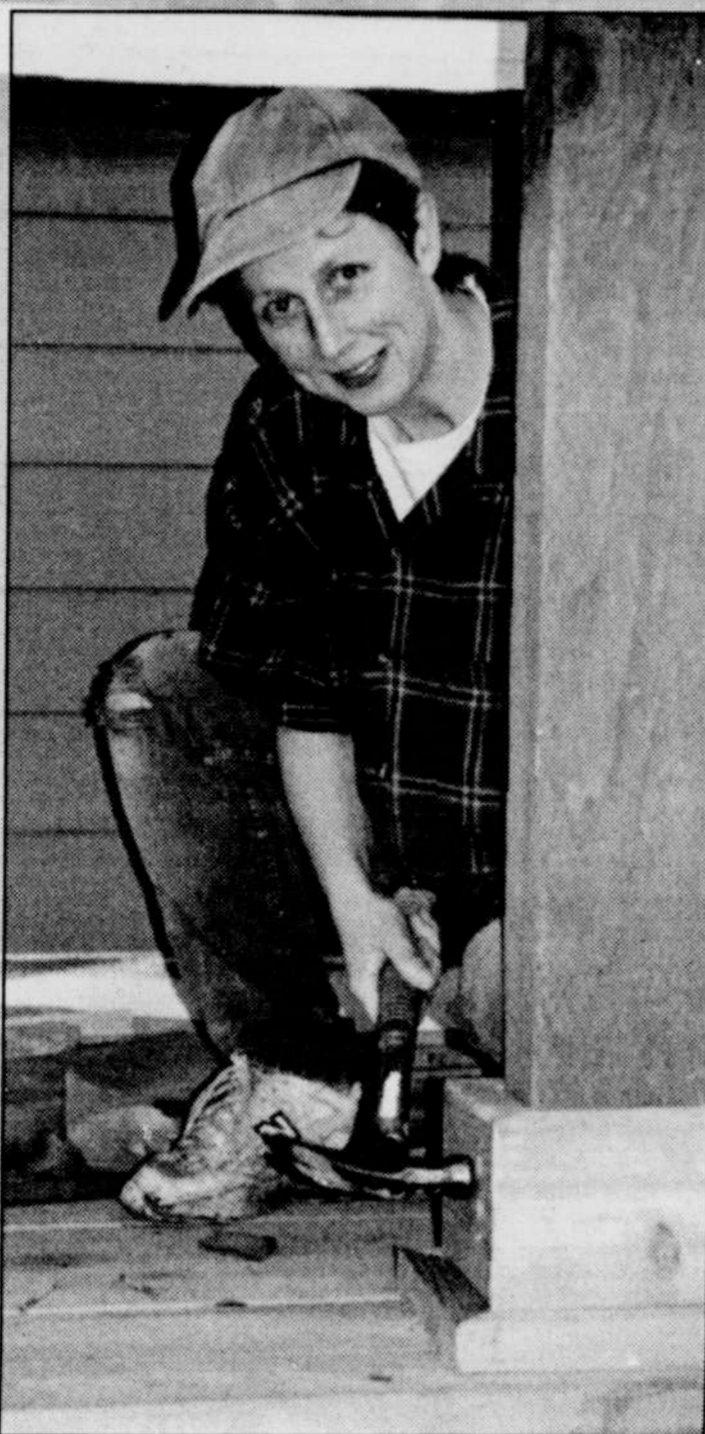
The program also prepares students for apprenticeships. Galisky thinks the courses are invaluable for preparing women for the trades. "They are more likely to stick it out," she said.

Kruse added that graduates are extremely successful in getting jobs; many own their own businesses. Between 800 and 900 students have completed B-FIT, Galisky said.

With the successes of preparing students for the trades, why is enrollment so low? Galisky thinks one reason is people simply don't know about the program. She, Kruse and others are trying to bring more students into B-FIT.

Another reason is women hesitate to enter the traditionally male-dominated trades. "I think it's cultural," Galisky said. "In other countries, women do construction work. We need to know we can be completely a woman and do carpentry."

Internalized sexism allows women to think



Anne Galisky

they can't do something hard or technical. To be a carpenter, a mason or a machinist challenges and shatters cultural and sexist stereotypes.

Women who enter the trades have been able to brush aside these hindering stereotypes. "It's no accident that there are so many lesbians in the trades," Galisky laughed.

She noted that one way women are kept out of the trades is by being labeled lesbians. "So if you have confronted it already, it can't be used against you!"


She added that sexual minorities always have been pioneers. "Lesbians are already challenging gender stereotypes, so it's easier to do other things that challenge these stereotypes."

Galisky wants women to realize they can enter the trades if they want to. "There's a lot to say in not letting cultural stereotypes get in the way of what you want to do—whatever that is," she stressed.

Why would women want to enter the trades? Galisky said she loves her work and has pride in it. "I love making something that I can see—the satisfaction of taking an idea and making it a reality."

She also gets to work outside and wear jeans, and her body feels strong. "I like the good feeling of tiredness at the end of the day from working."

And the pay is good, too, she added. According to the B-FIT brochure, average yearly earnings for carpenters range from \$24,000 to \$55,000, for electricians from \$30,000 to \$49,000 and for welders from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

The B-FIT program lasts for two quarters. The next quarter begins Jan. 8 at PCC's Rock Creek Campus. 

**BUILDING FUTURES IN INDUSTRY AND TRADES will hold an orientation 1 p.m. Dec. 5 in Room 136 of Building 5 at Portland Community College's Rock Creek Campus. For more information, call John Fulton at 503-614-7255.**

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