

Connie Ashbrook: Bringing women into the trades

By **DON McIntosh**
Associate Editor

Growing up in Cleveland in the late 1960s, Connie Ashbrook went to a high school that offered shop classes. But only for boys.

Newspaper help wanted ads said “men wanted” or “women wanted.” They meant it.

But by the time Ashbrook, now 54, entered the workforce, legal barriers to women were coming down. In 1987, she became Oregon’s first female journeyman elevator mechanic, and a member of Elevator Constructors Local 23. She’d grown up alongside five sisters. Now she had 230 brothers.

Yet her true life’s work began in 1989, when she helped found Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. Oregon Tradeswomen is one of only about 10 groups nationwide that work to recruit women to join building trades unions — and push to make sure there’s room for them.

Despite the good will and cooperation of apprenticeship programs, women make up only 1 in 20 apprentices statewide, a number that has risen just 1 percent in 30 years.

Progress has been slow, Ashbrook says — not because union training programs discriminate — but because it’s hard for anyone to get into construction craft unions, and harder for women, who don’t have helpful support networks.

“People get their jobs because of their networks,” Ashbrook said. And that’s true for just about any good job, she added: “It’s who you know and

who’s your friend.”

It’s very competitive to get into a building trades union, Ashbrook said, so you have an edge if a friend or family member is promoting you, maybe giving you a summer job where you can get gain entry-level experience.

Ashbrook’s own history shows how hard it can be for a woman to get into the building trades. Her first workplace was a factory in her native Cleveland, Ohio, where she used a drill press to make radio parts; it was unskilled, dull, poorly-paid work. She then waitressed six years, during which she married, divorced, moved to Missouri, and came to Portland, Oregon, in 1977.

In Portland, a female friend who’d been a crane operator in the service told her about the building trades. In building trades unions, you start as an apprentice and earn a living wage — plus health and pension benefits — while you learn on the job — building highways and high-rise buildings, hospitals and high-tech manufacturing facilities. After two to five years of classroom and on-the-job training, you become a journeyman and double your wage. It’s typically hard physical work, performed outdoors, but it’s also well-paid and immensely satisfying. You work as part of a team, and every day, you see the results of your labor.

To get in, Ashbrook learned to drive a school bus, and used that experience to get into a dump truck driving pre-apprenticeship program with the Teamsters Union. As a Teamster, she worked on several federally-funded construction projects. The federal government was



Connie Ashbrook, executive director of Oregon Tradeswomen Network Inc., at work in her Northeast Portland office.

encouraging contractors to employ women and minorities, and keeping track of compliance.

Winter came. Construction slowed. She was without work from November to March. Ashbrook kept going to the hiring hall seeking work, but because she had little seniority, she was at the end of the line. And Ashbrook had joined the Teamsters just as Congress passed a law deregulating the trucking industry. In almost no time, most companies got rid of their in-house fleets, which had unionized drivers, and hired independent owner-operators.

Ashbrook found out about a federally-funded pre-apprenticeship program for carpenters, and took a class for women at Portland Community College. She worked as an apprentice carpenter on the I-205/Airport highway interchange. Male mentors helped her learn the ropes.

Ashbrook said new people trying to break in have to haunt the job site and talk to people doing the hiring. It was harder as a woman.

“They laughed at me,” Ashbrook said. “I would tell them, ‘I did a good job on this project, here’s a reference.’ But they didn’t take me seriously.”

Then came the recession, and nobody was getting hired, much less women, Ashbrook recalls.

Ashbrook had joined a loose network of women construction workers that met for monthly potlucks. One woman who had joined the Elevator Constructors told Ashbrook that Montgomery Elevator [now Kone] would be looking for workers, especially women, because they got a project with public money.

Ashbrook applied, and met with a pair of company managers, both men. The branch manager was straightforward: “One of us doesn’t think you could do this work,” he told her, “but one of us is ready to give you a chance.”

They took her back to the shop area to show her what she’d be lifting — a 250-pound steel rail. “Can you lift that?” they asked.

Ashbrook is 5’3”. She looked at the rail, and wasn’t sure. But she wanted the job. Cheerily, she replied, “Sure, I’ll lift one end if one of you wants to lift the other.” The managers were in suits. The rail was greasy and dirty. “No, that’s okay,” they said. She got the job.

She started as a helper and was paired up with a mechanic. She spent one night a week for three years in a classroom. She loved all of it.

Ashbrook successfully completed the union’s five-year apprenticeship program, and became Oregon’s first woman journeyman elevator construc-

tor. But within a few years, her female friends had all dropped out, and she was the only woman elevator constructor in the local.

“I thought I would be just the tip of the iceberg, and there’d be tons of women coming in, and it wouldn’t be unusual to be a woman construction worker.”

She didn’t see that happening. Part of it was President Ronald Reagan, Ashbrook said, who had taken the teeth out of federal affirmative action efforts. Contractors no longer had to be welcoming to women.

“But part of it was also that our culture hadn’t changed fast enough,” Ashbrook said.

In the spring of 1989, she attended a national conference for women in the building trades, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. There she heard the stories of women from around the country.

Ashbrook and a group of three other women decided to form Oregon Tradeswomen, modeled after groups in other cities. It started as a support group, meeting monthly. It was also a way to get word out when jobs were available.

After a few years, Ashbrook realized networking wouldn’t be enough to fill the trades with women; they’d have to recruit. With grants from the Oregon Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor, Oregon Tradeswomen hired a part-time staffer to interest girls and young women in building trades careers.

In 1996, Ashbrook left her elevator constructor job to work full-time as Oregon Tradeswomen’s executive director. The group’s budget was \$35,000. Today it has a staff of nine and a budget of \$700,000, mostly from government grants.

In part, Oregon Tradeswomen is making up for public schools’ failure to connect women to careers in construction.

“Our school system is educating people for college, but doesn’t do that same level of guidance for people who are going into blue collar careers,” Ashbrook said. “So people knock around for a while until they fall into something.”

“The general public doesn’t have a clue how much a construction worker has to know,” Ashbrook said.

It takes two years of apprenticeship to become a journey-level roofer, and five to become a journey-level carpenter, sheet metal worker, or plumber.

“This is the highest paid blue-collar work, so there’s lots of people who want to do this,” Ashbrook said. “The trades, both union and open shop, generally have never had to advertise or market what they do because they’ve had all the white male applicants they need.”

And there are social aspects to the work that most people don’t think about, Ashbrook said. Men are sometimes afraid women co-workers will file a lawsuit, or start to cry if their work is criticized. And for women, moving into an occupation that by tradition is exclu-

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