

# Welding is a viable option for women seeking life-long career

## Three women talk about career, need for more females in sheet metal industry

By TIFFANNIE BOND

When it comes to sheet metal welders, the adage “anything you can do, I can do better” isn’t a phrase of competition or ego. Women welders in the industry are the minority — by far — but a few of them are looking to show their male counterparts that when it comes to their craft, the question of who is the most talented is a toss-up.

Three women from across the United States took to welding at different times in their lives, all through the International Training Institute (ITI), the education arm of the unionized sheet metal industry.

Misty Whaley of Conyers, Georgia, is a single mom who wanted to provide for her family. Irais Gandarilla of Portland, Oregon, always wanted to create metal sculptures, and she found a career she loves in the process. Rachel Koon of Charleston, South Carolina, followed her husband into the sheet metal industry and found her steady hands helped her earn a living at a career she enjoyed.

Although different, they each share a passion for welding as well as the empowerment and challenge it brings to them, not to mention the innate ability to not sit still.

“Women are known for paying attention to detail, and we’re not in a rush,” Whaley said. “It takes patience.”

Koon’s steady hands and patience have proven priceless in her newfound career. She participated in the compre-

hensive welding program, an intense three-week class meant to fast track welders for large multi-year projects in the Southeast.

“A lot of women, when they think of this, they think it’s hot and sweaty and dangerous. It’s very safe,” said Koon, 22, who grew up on a farm and isn’t afraid of hard work and dirt. “It’s a great way to support your family, and I think if other women gave it a chance, they’d enjoy it as well.”

Gandarilla, 30, meets once a month with other female sheet metal workers as a sign of solidarity and sisterhood. In the fourth year of the industry’s five-year apprenticeship program, she takes every opportunity to learn and explore her creative side.

“We’re trying to break into a male-dominated field. Many guys think sheet metal is a man’s job, and it is, but it’s a woman’s job, too,” she said. “Every time I go to the training center, I know I’m going to get to fabricate and build. I love it. It’s dirty work, but I love it. For me, I’ve always wanted to build metal sculptures. I’ve always liked putting metal together to create art.”

Another similarity of these three women is they are all currently working. Gandarilla is working on the new high school in Sandy, Ore.; Whaley works as the only welder in the shop at Perimeter Sheet Metal in Georgia; and Koon is in the fabrication shop at Inter-Mech in South Carolina.

With large projects coming up in the Southeast, as well as smaller jobs across the rest of the country, welding is a viable skill that can open doors to work, said Steve Kowats, quality assurance manager and industrial specialist for the ITI. “Someone from the local community needs to recruit women and prepare them for welding in the trade,”



Irais Gandarilla of Portland had a creative mind for sculpture, and in the process of learning to weld to satisfy her creative side, she found a career she loves. She is currently in the fifth year of her apprenticeship program at Sheet Metal Workers Local 16.

Kowats added. “From my experience, women generally tend to approach any job with more forethought and are less likely to rush into the task as many men I have taught and worked with do. This isn’t to say that jumping in and getting it done does not have a place, which can be a lesson for anyone entering the construction trade — when to contemplate and when to get busy. Welding lends itself to careful planning.”

All three female welders said they would like to see more women in the industry, especially in welding, but they don’t think many know it’s a viable option.

“As a woman, I’m taking these amazing skills and applying them to a real job, real pension, real benefits. I

can’t believe I can do this,” Gandarilla said. “Every day I walk away in awe. It’s hard work, but it’s fun. I can’t sit behind a desk. If other women find themselves saying ‘I worked on a project in the garden or at home,’ and they walked away from it feeling good, they need to be looking into this trade.”

Currently the unionized sheet metal industry offers a three-week intensive training program in South Carolina to entering non-members who would like to shift careers. Applications can be downloaded online at [www.scsheetmetalworkers.org](http://www.scsheetmetalworkers.org). Once the application is submitted, qualified applicants must pass an entrance exam to be accepted into the program. Currently, there are approximately 140 welding positions to fill due to long-term federal projects in the southeastern United States. The training center is finishing up the last concentrated welding program for the

year. A new schedule for 2012 is currently being worked out and wasn’t finalized at press time.

More than 15,000 apprentices are registered at training facilities in the United States and Canada. The ITI is jointly sponsored by Sheet Metal Worker’s International Association and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association. Located in Alexandria, Va., ITI produces a standardized sheet metal curriculum supported by a wide variety of training materials free of charge to sheet metal apprentices and journeymen.

For more information about ITI, visit [www.sheetmetal-iti.org](http://www.sheetmetal-iti.org) or call 703-739-7200.

*(Editor’s Note: Tiffannie Bond is a freelance writer and media relations specialist at Imagine Communications.)*

Holiday Greetings

**Washington Capital**  
MANAGEMENT, INC.

**Hoping Your Holidays Are Filled With Happiness**

**ATPA**

Administrators of  
Employee Benefit Plans

7600 SW Mohawk St.  
Tualatin, OR 97062  
503 454-3800 Fax: 503 796-7332

**Pati Piro-Bosley**