

# WOMEN IN THE TRADES

Nationally, women have never accounted for more than 3 percent of building trades workers. We asked three women building trades workers to share their stories.

## Kirstie Reeves — BRICKLAYER



Kirstie Reeves, 28, was a stay-at-home mother of three small kids ... until her husband decided to live a life of drugs, and became abusive. She left him, took the kids, and started over.

Seeking work that could support her family, she attended a trade fair, and considered different crafts. Reeves says bricklaying appealed to her — because she always liked Legos.

Eighteen months later, she's 60 percent of the way through the training program of Bricklayers and Allied Crafts Local 1, and is making \$23.95 an hour as an apprentice brick finisher.

Bricklayer is an *overwhelmingly* male occupation. Reeves knows of only one female brick journeyman in Local 1, and she wants to be the second.

"Most people, when I said I was applying to get into the bricklayers union, thought I was nuts," Reeves said. "As far as construction fields go, I did

choose one of the harder ones. There's a lot of heavy lifting, and you're always on the go. There's no stand-around time."

At first, she was sore — very sore. She could feel muscle tearing. She ate a lot of protein. But she approached it with a boot camp mentality, and got through it. She lost a lot of weight, and gained serious muscle. Now, Reeves often carries two tongs of six or seven bricks, one in each hand.

"I like to carry two tongs, because I can, and it's fun to watch guys' reaction."

At work on construction sites, she encountered crude humor, and had to get used to foremen cussing people out for minor mistakes.

"Women have to be tough mentally to do this. They always say, 'Leave your emotions at the gate.'"

She also faced negative reactions from some coworkers.

"It's just one of those things: Men are not used to seeing women in my trade,"

Reeves says.

"When I first started, I had a lot of people discouraging me.... I got a lot of harassment from male coworkers, like, 'Wouldn't you rather be home with your children?' Well, yeah, actually, I would, but that's not really an option. I'm a single mother now. I need to provide for my kids. And I want my children to learn that they can do anything, and they can take care of themselves."

The union package means fully-paid health care for her son and two daughters, and it pays enough for her to support her family and help her dad, who's disabled.

Reeves says there are times — when it's wet or snowy, and hands get numb — when she has doubts. But for the most part, she loves her work, and is proud of what she does. She spent last summer helping build South Cooper Mountain High School in Sherwood. Now she's working for J&S Masonry on a job in Northwest Portland. There's lots more work on the horizon.

## Rosa Rivera — ROOFER



For Rosa Rivera, 34, construction work runs in the family. Her father is Ricardo Rivera, now retired after a career in International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 280. Her two brothers and her sister followed him and joined the wireman trade. But Rosa opted to pursue a career as a roofer.

She now makes \$24.25 an hour as an 85 percent apprentice,

and she's a member of Roofers Local 49. In two years, she expects to earn the \$28.53 an hour journeylevel wage.

"It's hard work," Rivera says. "It's challenging. It's fun. I like it."

She's also a licensed hair stylist, not a bad line when roofing work slows down in the rainy months.

Currently, she's working for Snyder Roofing on top of a new building for Nike's In-House Manufacturing (IHM) division. Three other Snyder employees are women. But on any given day, she's still likely to be the only woman on a crew.

"In the roofing industry there are still some men that believe that women should be home, cooking and cleaning and having kids," Rivera says. "Not so much anymore, but still a few."

Rivera says she doesn't let it bother her.

"I get told a lot that I work circles around these guys."

Rivera says she's not trying to prove anything; that's just how she is.

Does she have a message for male building trades workers? "Give us a chance. We'll get there."

## Monica Gauthier — PILEDRIIVER

Monica Gauthier, 41, builds bridges. She's a "pilebuck," as a member of Piledrivers Local 196. That means hard work on structures like bridges and docks, and a base wage of \$35.45. She just finished a project on the Sellwood Bridge. Before that she helped lift the I-205 bridge 18 inches while traffic rushed by underneath.

"I love what I do," Gauthier says. "I love building things. I love being able to show off my work to my friends and family."

Gauthier says she was raised by her grandparents in relative privilege, but left home at an early age, and made some mistakes. She served five years 10 months at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. There she worked at the facility's physical plant, ran conduit, and dug ditches.

Newly released in 2005, she went to a career fair that turned her life around. Within days, she was on a construction job site as a member of Laborers 320. Later, she transferred to the piledrivers and got credit for her work as a laborer.

Gauthier says pile drivers are a bit of a rough crowd, but she hasn't experienced discrimination. She thinks that has a lot to do with her personality.

"If you go out there with a chip on your shoulder thinking you're a woman and you deserve this and this, then the guys are immediately gonna get defensive. And they're going to be standoffish and not involve you in things."

"You spend half your life with these people, and you trust them with your life, so you gotta build a rapport."

"Because I'm just one of the guys, occasionally I'll have 'big brother' or 'dad' syndrome come up. They want to protect me or stop me from doing things because they think it's dangerous. They don't want me to get hurt, or they think



it's too heavy. And I'm just like, 'Let me make that decision. If something's too dangerous and I don't feel comfortable doing it, I'm going to tell you.'

"I don't want to be the 'girl on the job.'"

As for what to call her? "I'm a journeyman," Gauthier says. "I personally can't stand that when they change it to journeyperson or journeyworker, journeywoman. I know I'm in a male-dominated trade. The fact that I'm a journeyman doesn't change the fact that I'm a woman."