

# ...Diversity

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rep Don Kool, are active in the committee.

One reason the union remains overwhelmingly white is that those who hear about the apprenticeship program are often relatives of those already in the trade. O'Neal didn't have that pipeline, and had to find his own way. He got the phone numbers of two union contractors and called them every other day trying to get in. That was 2006. Five years of apprenticeship later, he was a journeyman pipefitter. O'Neal prides himself on bringing professionalism to every job, but over the years he's had to contend with inappropriate treatment from some co-workers — from racist jokes and derogatory comments to being called "boy."

"That's unprofessional. And people who it doesn't happen to don't understand it," he said.

It's a history echoed by fellow Diversity Committee member Lela Brown, a journeyman plumber who joined Local 290 in 2004. Brown loves the physical aspect of the work itself, and enjoys working as part of a team to get the job done. But she also faced disparate treatment and systematic workplace harassment. As an apprentice, she was kept busy cleaning and sweeping for months while a brand-new white male apprentice was put to work putting in pipe. Male co-workers suggested that she was only on the job because of quotas, or might be there to make money in a lawsuit. Others made gross sexual com-

ments, joked about domestic violence, leave porn in front of her on the lunch table, and talk in front of her about the bodies of women walking by. She eventually notified her general foreman about what she was being subjected to, and was laid off soon after.

"There's this idea that we all have to have thick skin and put up with it," Brown says. "That does a disservice to our craft. Some of the best tradespeople aren't going to put up with cruelty or being mocked for their identity. We *are* tough, but that doesn't mean we can't support each other and learn how to respect each other more."

Brown also experienced solidarity on the job over the years, and benefited from coaching and support from other male co-workers.

She and O'Neal hope the Diversity Committee can help improve their union's culture.

"My goal is to discuss these uncomfortable things that need to be discussed," O'Neal said.

"It's not about policing people's language, or trying to change who our fellow union members are," Brown says. "We don't want to silence people. We want people to grow ... What we're trying to achieve is pretty basic, to be treated with respect in the workplace."

Christian, the business manager, is in solid agreement. Attending Diversity Committee meetings, he says it hurt to hear what members had experienced. He says Local 290 needs to be a place where people from all different backgrounds feel at home.

"I believe our local needs the change, and there isn't any doubt about that," he says.



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