

Women are making their way in the trades

by Violet Snow, February 5, 2019, *Woodstock Times*

Paula Dutcher was heading for the cashier at a hardware store with a cartload of items she needed for a house renovation. A male contractor who was standing on line offered to let her use his discount. He was surprised when she politely informed him she had her own contractor's discount.

Dutcher, a Shandaken native, finds that being a woman gives her a positive edge in the building trade, although the presence of a female carpenter/contractor is often hard for men to process. As a mother, Jenna Rodgers, an electrician in Shandaken, appreciates the flexibility her work provides. Both of them feel the building trades are ripe for the entry of more women.

So does the carpenters' union. The New England Regional Council of Carpenters co-sponsored an informational session in Kingston on January 29 for their pre-apprenticeship program that allows women to find out if carpentry is a career path for them. The Ulster County Office of Employment and Training and Workforce Development Board invited "women between the ages of 18 to 25 who are searching for a career and are interested in learning new skills, like to work with their hands, and are looking for excellent pay" to attend the session.

"We're trying to reflect the change in the workforce around us," said Jim Malcolm, president of union's Local 279. "It's no longer the case that the husband works and the wife stays home. Women who've come through our pre-apprenticeship program have knocked out the concept that women can't do the work."

The local, covering nine eastern New York counties, currently has 25 female members, about one percent of the active membership, but "that's increased tremendously in last couple of years," said Malcolm. "It used to be you might find a husband-and-wife team, but that was about it."

The union's Sisters in the Brotherhood (SIB) is headed by Susan Schultz, whose bio says she's "built bridges all over the State of New Jersey." The SIB provides a venue for networking and mutual support, as well as a mentoring program in which women apprentices are paired with an experienced journey-level woman carpenter.

Dutcher has built a successful business, Remod-All Construction, LLC, renovating residential properties. Her father was a carpenter who died when she was 15. She spent most of her childhood evenings in his workshop, hammering nails and then learning to use power tools. When she came home from college with a degree in English and no desire to be a teacher, she took a job painting a house. "It turned into an eight-month-long renovation project. I really needed a job, so I convinced the owner I could do all the carpentry." Working for minimal pay, she learned as she went along, bringing in more experienced friends to show her how to make repairs. When the job ended, she found apprenticeships with carpenters seeking helpers. She began to get calls for installing cabinets and tiling backsplashes, then gradually took on larger projects.

For a while, she worked as a subcontractor for bigger companies, but she had to quit. "They'd place me with a homeowner, and it would turn out they weren't ready to work with a young woman. It was against the company's policy to discriminate, but I didn't want to work with people who weren't comfortable with me."

Four years ago, she formed her LLC. Now she has six full-time employees and hires subcontractors on a contract basis, especially for plumbing and electrical work. She gets along well with her crew. "Macho jerks don't apply for a job with a 26-year-old woman as their boss. I get open-minded, artistic guys, and we have a family relationship. If someone has a birthday, I bring a birthday cake to the job. If a guy's kid is sick, and he needs to take time off, I'm okay with that. One guy is in a punk screamo band, and I went to his show this weekend."

Dutcher finds she communicates differently with men than with women. She refers to philosopher Hélène Cixous, who wrote that women have their own language. "With a woman, I'll say,

'It would be great if you could be here on time tomorrow.' With a guy, I have to say, 'I need you here on time.' Jenna is my main electrician, and when she's around, we can talk in our polite falsetto. With men, I'm more blunt."

Dutcher's feminine style of communicating is useful when she's dealing with clients. "I talk to the homeowners about everything. We're constantly on the phone. It creates a sense of trust, and they don't feel they have to watch over my shoulder."

At first, homeowners would turn to a male crew member to discuss issues onsite, and she'd have to point out that she was the boss. But success has brought respect. Most of her customers these days are Brooklyn transplants, successful young people who want to bring their families upstate. They have no problem with her age or gender. She still faces sexism at the hardware store, where several times a week, she'll get a comment like "Wow, are you going to paint your house all by yourself?" She said, "It doesn't bother me too much, but I wish people could get over the way I look. I'd like it to be not 'Oh, she's good for a woman' but 'Oh, she's a good carpenter.' It's okay that I get jobs where people say, 'Let's give her a shot because she's a woman,' but I prefer when someone takes me at face value."

Jobs where's no indoor plumbing can be a challenge. "Men can just go pee by a tree. It's hard for me, especially in the winter. Also being short. I'm only 5'1", so it's physically hard to move materials."

At the moment, Dutcher is working on three houses that require interior gutting. One older structure, just outside Phoenicia, involves replacing all 45 windows, 10 doors, and the exterior siding. Her current favorite project is more creative—a bathroom renovation in an artist's studio in Woodstock. The owner made her own tiles for the backsplash and consulted with Dutcher on picking out assorted paint colors and types of rustic wood.

She likes how renovation draws her into the life of a family for several months. As a poet, she draws inspiration from watching kids grow and observing families together. Still writing, she was recently accepted into a masters program in English at SUNY New Paltz, where she'll be taking one class a week and continuing to work.

Jenna Rodgers did well in school and had full financial aid for attending college, but she didn't make it past freshman orientation. A few days later, she was on a plane to London. After a few years of bumming around Europe, she came home to Shandaken and needed a job.

A neighbor and long-time family friend, Bob Lepp, took her on as an apprentice in his electrical contracting business. "I like physical work and being able to work in all different places," she said. "Bob was the most flexible person to work with. When I had a child and was getting back to working, I could do a two-hour job with him and get home to nurse. Not everyone you're going to find to work with would be able to do that."

To be certified as an electrician, Rodgers explained, "You have to train with a master electrician for five years, and you need a certain number of years of experience to get licensed." Now that she has her own business, she still has the flexibility to take time off and go to her son's soccer games.

Rodgers has never faced resistance from clients or co-workers about her gender. "I have a set crew of different contractors I work with regularly. I've never had a problem, and if I did, I'd have the freedom to not work with them again. I get a lot of work. Electrical work is always needed." There are a few drawbacks unrelated to gender, such as having to crawl through attics full of old insulation or over ancient squirrel carcasses in crawlspaces. "But that doesn't really bother me," she said.

She has noticed a lack of younger people going into the building trades, at least in this area. "One of the mistakes of the trades in general," she observed, "is that it's considered if you're not doing well in school, you should go learn a trade. It's a fallback instead of something in its own right."

"Most of my crew is over the age of 40," Dutcher agreed. "College was pushed so much on my generation. People my age going into this now are going to be well-off by the time they retire. It's a cliché that you either go to college or do construction, but I've done both. In carpentry, you learn

something every day, and you also rely on your core studies. I use chemistry in tiling, physics when I'm on a ladder and I have to throw something down.”

She feels there's a growing demand for women in the field because of their ability to build relationship. “A little old lady feels way more comfortable with me as opposed to some brash guy. There's a sense of communication that people appreciate.”