

## Tradeswomen Tuesday: Kina, a Carpenter

ERA Staff

*Equal Rights Advocates is a proud member of the Taskforce on Tradeswomen Issues, which unites local, regional and national expertise and action to support tradeswomen and women who want access to these occupations. As part of our continuing commitment to advancing the conversation on employment issues faced by women in the trades, we are proud to announce that going forward we will be hosting a weekly feature profiling a woman in the trades. This platform is meant to provide a space for tradeswomen to provide a firsthand perspective on their careers. This week's installment of Tradeswomen Tuesdays introduces us to Kina. Check in every Tuesday to learn more about the inspiring women of the trades.*

"People make or break the job. You can do tough jobs as long as the people you're working with are reasonable." – Kina McAfee, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Chicago Local 1 and Assistant Coordinator for the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters Apprenticeship Program

After nearly 30 years as a carpenter, Kina McAfee, says that "not a day goes by that I don't think about retirement and realize just how lucky I am that I will be able to do that." Not that anyone who knows her would buy that line about retirement, as active a person as Kina is. Kina has long been an inspiration and a mentor to countless women, helping them learn about and begin their careers in the trade.

Her own journey started in the early 1980s when she got involved with a local community organization after college, rehabbing apartments. She really enjoyed the work and a colleague referred her to Sunbow, a new program designed as a result of a pending lawsuit, to prepare women for direct entry into the carpentry, painting or labor apprenticeship programs. "It seemed to me to be a way better option than anything else I had," she says. "I really enjoyed hands-on projects and I didn't want to go back to school, I was done with school."

In 1985, she completed the program and joined the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters Local #1 as an apprentice.

"On my first job at the Hilton Hotel, I was a little impatient with them, they just hired me because they needed a woman on the job and they had me cutting cardboard to cover up the heating units in each room. They were expecting that I wouldn't be able to do anything, so I did it the best I could so I could prove something to them and move on to the next thing," she says. "After we got past that, it was all good."

Over her years in the field, she worked in a variety of roles, including framing, hardware, concrete, and bridgework. It wasn't the work itself that she found challenging — it was working with some of the guys on the job.

"People make or break the job. You can do tough jobs as long as the people you're working with are reasonable," she says.

One man initially refused to work with her because she was a woman, but experienced a change of heart and would later request her as a partner.



“He really wasn’t expecting me to be able to do anything at all, but we were a great team, really knocked it out and stayed on the project for a long time,” she said.

What helped her, she remembers, is that she was young, tall (with long arms), a natural loner, and, she says, “a really, really competitive” personality. To avoid getting irritated with her co-workers, she had a rule that “if there are more than three guys having lunch together, automatically, I’d eat by myself.”

Kina highlights working as a carpenter while parenting as a significant challenge. She relied on daycare and back-up baby sitters, and, from the time he was old enough, he was a latchkey kid.

“When he got sick, that was the biggest challenge. A lot of the guys, if they aren’t single parents, just don’t have this pressure and as far as being seen as the most reliable employee, you can forget about that when you have kids, she says.

Her hard work and talent paid off, though, landing her a job as an instructor for Chicago Regional District Council of Carpenters Apprenticeship Program in 1995, and, this year, she became the first woman ever to hold the position of Assistant Coordinator there. She hopes she can improve women’s retention in apprenticeship. Like a lot of other tradeswomen, she continues to point out the buildings she built with pride. “I know we all say it, but it’s true: It’s very satisfying.”

*This post was written by Jayne Vellinga, executive director of Chicago Women in Trades and Francoise Jacobsohn of the Taskforce on Tradeswomen Issues.*