

Tradeswomen Tuesday: Vanessa, A Bricklayer

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Last week I visited Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT) and met their awesome staff and some of their tradeswomen board members and saw their amazing training facility. One of the board members was sewing moccasins for "Rock Your Mocs" Day which I at first I thought was some strange Chicago custom. I was soon set straight. Rock your Mocs is a worldwide event for indigenous people to stand together. I also learned that November is Native American Heritage Month, so this week's Tradeswoman Tuesday is a CWIT Board member, "Brickie" and enrolled member of the Hochunk Nation (and a quarter Yaqui and Chicana as well).

How did you come to choose bricklaying as a career?

My dad has his own company. He does all forms of masonry, concrete, restoration masonry, bricklaying, plumbing, everything except electrical work. He started me off the summer I was 11 as a mason tender. I did everything that a mason tender does including making the mortar, keeping my father and his workers stocked with material including bricks and mortar and cleaning, sweeping and packing up at the end of the day. I toughened up fast. I liked earning money and spending quality time with my dad.

The first guy to harass me was an employee of my dad's. I was all of 16. My dad asked me what I was going to do about it. I said if it was up to me I would fire him and he told me to go ahead and do it. I was not comfortable confronting the guy. But with my dad supporting my decision, I told the worker that he couldn't hit on me, I was just a kid and he was fired. Since I also wrote the checks, I told him that when he came to pick up his last check from me that he needed to show some respect.

How did you become a union bricklayer?

I started looking on how to make a career of my own. I wanted to be a bricklayer but at that time in his life, my dad wasn't patient enough to be my boss and teach me at the same time. I researched bricklaying and learned about apprenticeships and unions. The apprenticeship director back then was not very welcoming. He told me to find a union sponsor, so I found one. Then he told me that he would get back to me and never did. When I called him back he told me that if the sponsor was going to hire me, he needed to hire the eight unemployed female apprentices in the school first. So that was a dead end.

My mom told me about Chicago Women in the Trades, (CWIT). I went there and found the support I needed. It still took me another two years to get into a bricklayer apprenticeship program. I took the 3 month CWIT Technical Opportunities Training program and took the test for the bricklayers. I thought I rocked the test and the interview but I was not accepted into the program. I was devastated. They wouldn't tell me why I was rejected but said I could take the test for the next class. While I was waiting, I took home improvement classes at the local community college so I would be even better prepared.

When I went back to take the test, I asked to get the results for both my tests. If I failed again, I wanted to know if it was the test or the interview. I was told that I had done well on the previous test but failed the interview because one of the interviewers didn't like that I had worked non-union. Since many union members start out non-union, I knew that was just an excuse for that contractor to give my interview poor scores. I did get into the next class. I thought I would have a huge amount to prove to pave the way for other women. But I was relieved to find that the instructors were very welcoming. I flourished and graduated at the top of the class.

On one of my first jobs as an apprentice, the foreman told me I didn't have what it took to be a bricklayer and he fired me. I entered the bricklaying apprentice competition for first years so that no one else could tell me I didn't have what it took. I won third place. The next year, I placed second even with two herniated discs from a workplace injury. An ironworker kicked a chunk of concrete from the roof to my head. It was never investigated. I didn't know about workmen's comp and I was afraid if I sued I would be blacklisted.

I placed first in my final year as an apprentice. I also placed in the regional competition which allowed me to compete on the international level. That was a great year for CWIT. A CWIT graduate won first place for the second year apprentices and the second place winner was the son of a CWIT bricklayer.

Have you worked steadily since you joined the bricklayers?

By the time my apprenticeship was ending, the recession hit. I went to work at CWIT as a part time math tutor. I also looked into finding another trade that had more work. There was a lot of money going to infrastructure in Minnesota, and through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Tribal Employment Rights Office, I was able to relocate and get training there as a concrete finisher.

After that program ended, I actually found work as a bricklayer on a job that had goals for women. They had an enforcement officer on the site who told them they needed bricklayer women. I worked in Minnesota for two years, and was on the advisory committee for Women Wear Hard Hats Too in Minneapolis. But I ended up moving back to Chicago a year and a half ago and have found steady work here ever since. I have now been in the bricklayer's union for 9 1/2 years.

What do you think is needed to be successful in this trade?

I am the kind of person who is happy when my hands are busy. I like to see the end result of my day's work and I really enjoy small talk and bantering with the



Vanessa Casillas, Bricklayer, International Union of Brick



guys. I love working out in the sunshine and I really like the rhythm of brick laying. I have a really good work ethic and genuinely enjoy meeting new co-workers. Bricklayers are pretty social, we hardly ever work alone, there's usually a team of bricklayers and mason tenders.

This past year I have taken up weight lifting and that makes everything easier. A lot of people think it's hard for a woman and it is — it's hard for everyone. But I still have the energy and discipline to go out after work and lift weights. It makes me happy and stronger and helps me when I have to flex on a co-worker to keep him in line. Joking!

I found out that for me, one of the easiest ways to stop harassment is to confront the harasser in front of other people. I found this out by accident. There was a guy spreading rumors that we were sleeping together. So after lunch, I went to confront him. I thought we were alone. I told him that I would show up at his home and tell his wife, I even told him that my dad hung out at the same bar he hung out in and my dad and uncles would take care of him for me. It got heated. Turns out that one of my brother "brickies" was up on the scaffolding above us and told *everybody* that I wasn't someone to mess with. I recently found out that another CWIT member told an apprentice who was complaining about a guy inappropriately touching himself when they were alone to "do what Vanessa does" and ask him why he was touching himself around her the next time they were in front of coworkers. Public discussion is a good way to hold bad actors accountable for their actions.

Why did you join the CWIT Board of Directors?

I have been volunteering with CWIT since I was a pre-apprentice. I do it because we are so underrepresented in the construction industry. I really think if more women knew this was an option more women would choose this work.

I also check in regularly with my apprenticeship director and he lets me know if a woman apprentice could use some help. Most of the women don't realize that I am coming to help train them. I just show up and work with the women the apprentice director points out to me. I teach them how to adapt the way men work to our different body structure. We have to use different methods to achieve the same results as the men. So far, many of the women I have worked with have made it through.

I want to pave the way for more women to succeed with the bricklayers. The number of women in my local apprenticeship program has tripled since I got there. The whole mood and mentality of women in apprenticeship has changed. More men now believe that we can succeed. Heck yeah, I worked hard to see that happen and I will continue to work hard to see even more women in the trades.

