

Women hardhats: Construction's not just for guys anymore

By Charles Hallman
Staff Writer



(l-r) Tesa Johnson, Michelle Miller and Tanessa Greene

-Photo by Charles Hallman

Michelle Miller once drove large vehicles in Iraq for two years. Now the Minneapolis resident looks forward to handling similar large construction equipment here in the Twin Cities soon.

Miller is one of 11 females in a 70-student heavy equipment operator class at Summit Academy OIC in North Minneapolis. The students recently got hands-on training by working on the construction of the new Heritage Park Senior Services Center, which is nearby the school, as part of their 20-week training.

During the two-day experience in the first week of March, Miller handled the loader and excavator equipment. She said of the training, "That was pretty exciting. I am learning a lot."

Summit Academy is a longtime nonprofit educational and vocational center that trains and finds employment opportunities for men and women from low-income areas. Although the students mostly come from the 55411 zip code, the school draws from all over the metro area, according to Executive Director Louis King.

Last year, 14 of 15 Summit women graduates got construction-related jobs, and 11 women signed up for training after attending a career expo held in February, said King.

"Our goal is to place a minimum of 25 new women in the industry this year," pledged Tanessa Greene, who works with Summit Academy to find such jobs for women graduates. She added something she heard from local employers last year: "Women are in high demand on public projects."

However, barriers still exist for women in construction, Greene noted. "I think there is a branding issue, and we have to work to overcome that.

"Not only is there a perception that women can't do this work, but the branding issue also is that there is a certain type of woman who can do this work. What we're finding

is that the face of the women in the trades is really changing. Women come from all backgrounds.”

Culture also is a barrier, said Greene. “Once these women get to the job site, there are some realities that they have to overcome just because they’re women.”

“What attracted me to this field is that there are not a lot of women,” said Miller, who served in the military and was deployed to Iraq in 2005-06. Now that she’s served her country — Miller said she was medically discharged — she’s ready to work with heavy construction equipment here at home.

“I think I can bring a lot — I am a hard worker,” she said proudly.

Women must be mentally tough to work construction jobs, said Greene. “You have to be a strong person, but you also have to be able to assert yourself, stand up for yourself, because that is one of the perceptions out there. A woman coming on the job site is going to be whining and complaining about every little thing like the weather conditions.”

That mental preparation actually begins in training, according to King Summit Academy counselor Tesa Johnson said, “I think most of [the women students] are happy to be in the program. If they speak to being overwhelmed, it is because of the math. They really like their focus.”

According to Greene, there is an estimated \$2.5 billion worth of construction projects in Minnesota planned for the next three years. “Louis and I sat down with the heads of the general construction organizations and negotiated partnerships.

My job has been to find the partners and negotiate placement commitments so that the graduates can have jobs,” she said.

Green also said that females who work in the construction trades too often “are out there on their own.” As a result, “We’ve organized an advisory committee of contractors, labor, unions, Ramsey County and the University of Minnesota,” she explained. This committee will help develop a “network that supports the unique needs of women in the trades.”

“The supports we identified that are needed are a focus group of Summit alumni women and journey-level women who have been in the trades for several years,” Green continued. “The second component they are looking for is a forum where they can gather, meet, and share experiences and support each other. And the third is the development of someplace where they can get ongoing training.”

The best construction job for most Summit Academy students is one located in the Twin Cities “that’s stable...versus when it is in Hibbing, Minnesota,” said King, adding that the ideal is a job lasting year-round as opposed to one “that starts in May and stops in October.”

“We may not get to define a job as a man’s job or a woman’s job,” said King, “or only White guys can get these jobs. It’s going to come to a point where if a business needs to be competitive — and businesses are competitive — they need workers of any gender and any race and ethnic background, period.”

Said Miller, who plans to graduate in May, “We all want to get employed after the program. We want to continue to learn even after we graduate, because there is so much more.”

Female students such as Miller “have impressed me so much,” said Greene. “There are lots of barriers that they had to overcome, but that’s what makes them sometimes our best students, because they tend to be more stable than the men.

“If you can drive large equipment in a war zone, you can do anything. It takes a special woman to do this work.”

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