

Lorna Moroz Development | Ottawa/Gatineau Construction and Renovations Articles

IN A MAN'S WORLD

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Being a woman in the construction trades can have its advantages, once you get past the stereotypes, Hattie Klotz finds.

Anything you can do, I can do better. Ethel Merman probably did not have carpentry, drywalling, tiling and plumbing in mind when she sang that song decades ago. But fast-forward and there are plenty of women in construction who are happy today to be considered equals in a male-dominated workplace.

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For Jessica Madott, an installer at StairWorld in Ottawa, carpentry is about working smart when the going gets tough.

“I think it’s about reaching a balance with the other gender. There’s no question that I can’t lift like a guy. It’s important to know your limitations in this industry and understand that asking for help isn’t a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of intelligence.

“As long as we can all work around our respective physical limitations to get the job done properly, efficiently and safely, then it doesn’t matter what it took to get there.”

Caroline Lambrechts, a site service technician at StairWorld, agrees with Madott that being successful means “working smarter rather than harder.”

“The biggest barrier is the mental barrier,” she says. “It can sometimes be intimidating to be surrounded by men and people are always surprised when I arrive at a job, but by the time I leave they’ve all come around. Everyone’s usually welcoming and I’ve had only two instances in two years when I’ve had trouble.”

When Ann Logan started out with Kott Lumber 15 years ago, she was the only female salesperson. Now there is one other.

“At the time, I was the only female sales rep in Ottawa and I had no idea what a two-by-four was. When I first went to one of my construction sites, one man said to me, ‘do you know you’re a woman? You’re not supposed to be doing this.’” But that’s all changed now. “It’s taken a while, but people don’t blink an eye now.”

For Madott, the route to professional bliss was a winding one. She tried university but kept changing courses. Nothing was challenging or interesting enough. Eventually, she took up an offer to work alongside her aunt, a retired schoolteacher who had become a contractor in

retirement. She never went back.

“I worked with her for several months, doing everything but electrical work. Carpentry felt best for me,” she says. So she signed on to the two-year Heritage program offered through Algonquin College in Perth. Twenty-five per cent of her class was women.

“Women have been in the trades for a long time,” she says, “but are only now becoming more visible, recognized ... and, thankfully, accepted. I liken this to the transitions women made in the past into jobs like doctors, lawyers and engineers; women in the trades will eventually be commonplace at some point, just not presently.”

Lorna Moroz, who has her own construction and renovation company based in Chelsea, disagrees. “I do know a few other women in the business,” she says, “but not many. I don’t think the signs are very encouraging. There are token women included in advertisements for courses for the trades, but it’s not widespread. This industry isn’t looking for women. After all, it is dirty, hard, wet work.

“When I was young, it was always assumed that I’d go to college, but never assumed that I would be doing what I do now. As a five-year-old, I spent my time drawing houses, but it just didn’t translate that I might be an architect. I’m not sure that’s changed much. However, I encounter so many women who, when learning what I can do, openly envy me my ability to fix things myself. They see it as empowering and I believe they’re right.”

Moroz came to construction in her early 30s after a degree in theatre design and production from York University and an early career in computer game development that imploded in the tech crash of 2000.

“It’s tangible work and good, healing work with your hands,” she says. But she also works between 10 and 12 hours daily at this time of year — six days a week. She, like Madott, has no children and acknowledges it might be impossible if she were trying to cater to the needs of children, too.

“I’m usually up and gone before my husband and sometimes get home later than him,” she says. “Sometimes he complains he’s not getting enough of me.”

Madott’s job as a carpenter pervades every aspect of her life. She struggles with basic problems such as finding equipment in her size, but then finds that size can be an advantage when she has to squeeze into a small space. “I always dread when my work boots wear out because finding a size six is not easy. Gloves, hard hats, etc. are all geared to larger builds.” Over the years, she’s encountered stereotyping but has never had a bad experience at any job or with any person other than one female supervisor.

“I’ve had my sexual orientation questioned several times, which I thought was strange (I wasn’t offended) and when I was dating I found it very interesting to see the varied reactions from men when I told them what I did for a living. Most were interested, curious and more-or-less supportive, but a handful felt that it wasn’t ‘women’s work’. Those dates didn’t end well.”

She’s been with her spouse for years and “he loves that I’m as handy as I am,” she says.

“We’ve done lots of renovations together.”

Moroz, who could build you a house if you asked, finds that she still gets the surprised, “good for you” response when she tells people what she does. She recalls an early experience that made a lasting impression. When she returned to Ottawa and first got in to the business, she spent over two years working with a man called David Gladwin in Ottawa, learning the ropes. She worked on bathrooms, kitchens and basements and honed her skills.

“One day he took me along to Home Depot on a materials run,” she recalls, “and when we got there he introduced me to the people in the store as ‘the new guy’. They thought this was

cute and novel, but David was surprised. It had never occurred to him that I was female.” Both Madott and Moroz find that being a woman in a man’s world has some big advantages. A lot of it comes down to trust. “A positive assumption that people make about women actually gives us an advantage in some situations,” Madott says. “There are many examples of women I’ve done work for who were comfortable just leaving me alone in the house to work on my own.”

Moroz finds that she gets passed from one female client to the next by word of mouth. “I think they find it easier to communicate with me and they know I respect their home in a way that most men don’t. It’s those little extras that make them feel that I love what I do and that builds some really rewarding relationships,” she says.

Logan has found that her gender brings respect in her workplace. “For years I used to visit a site supervisor and he would be yelling at all the men, but he’s never raised his voice at me, so in that way being female has definitely helped.”

For all these women, job satisfaction is extremely high on their list of reasons to go to work. Discrimination, dirt and the gritty side of construction don’t feature. “I love it,” says Logan. “I guess I’m one of the few people who loves to get up in the morning and go out to work.”

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