

Free program helps women, minorities join the trades

By Matthew Stolle
Jul 28, 2018
postbulletin.com

If you had told Julie Mauer and Nikki Pettitt two years ago that they would be working in construction as carpenters, they would have probably laughed.

Not too long ago, the two Austin women were working at a Hy-Vee grocery store, struggling to make ends meet. Mauer, 35, was often making just enough to pay rent. She had never previously held a job with benefits. Pettitt, 26, at one time was living on a couch and didn't own a car.

Five months into their new lives as union apprentice carpenters, they feel as if their lives have been transformed economically. Both have regular work that provides them a livable wage and benefits, including health care and two pensions.

"I like going to work now, because I actually get paid what I feel I'm worth," Mauer said.

Their presence at Southeast Minnesota construction sites is one sign of a more aggressive effort to recruit more women and minorities in the trades.

Women and minorities are woefully unrepresented in trade unions. Officials with Carpenters Local Union 1382 say there are about 15 women in the 550-member union, making up less than 1 percent of its membership. Minorities are in the single digits, percentage wise.

There is also a practical need to increase the representation of women and minorities in the trades. Federal- and state-funded projects often stipulate that a certain percentage of a contracted workforce be women and minorities.

Carpenters and some other trades, moreover, are in the midst of a generational shift, as many journeymen enter or near retirement.

The search for carpenters and other trades workers comes at a time when the pool of potential workers isn't particularly deep. Unemployment in Southeast Minnesota right now is at a rock-bottom 2.8 percent.

Full-employment is considered around 4 percent. Workers are simply hard to find, as the proliferation of Help Wanted signs attests.

The Rochester area is also in the midst of a building boom.

“Right now as we sit, we have zero carpenters out of work right now,” said Dominic Andrist, a business agent for local 1382.

Mauer and Pettitt would not have found themselves in the roles of carpenters if not for a collaborative effort between the carpenters union and Workforce Development Inc.

“It sounded too good to be true,” Maurer recalled about the free program. “Like, this can’t be free.”

With the help of a federally funded grant, the two groups put together a seven-week program that sought to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in the trade. Sixteen Rochester area people were enrolled in the program.

“With the number of people who are going to be retiring in the next 10 years, we’re already starting to run short, and it’s only going to get worse,” said Susan Boehm, regional career pathway coordinator for Workforce Development Inc.

The first two weeks of the program were spent at Workforce Development on what Boehm calls “soft” or “essential” skills: What does it mean to come to work everyday? To take direction from a supervisor? To have a good work ethic?

The final five weeks, the students took classes and received hands-on carpentry training at the union’s Rochester training center. They learned about workplace safety and first aid. Many were introduced to the tools of their trade and how to use them.

“A lot of them had never picked up a tape measure, had never picked up a hammer or even seen a Skil saw, so it was more protection for them,” said Jason Schwingle, a full-time carpentry instructor for Local 1382. “Plus, these are the tools of our trade.”

Of the 16 who started the program, 15 graduated. Each of the graduates was presented with a set of tools during the graduation ceremony. Once graduated, the students were required to get a job with a union contractor. The union contractor then had the option of keeping them and getting them signed into the union.

Once the students were signed into the union, they were officially part of the union’s apprenticeship program. Four months later, seven of the original 16 continue to work as carpenters.

Mauer and Pettitt, now first-year apprentices, have supported each other through their classes and first construction jobs. During their training, the two drove together from Austin to the training facility in Rochester, sharing the cost of gas.

“I probably wouldn’t have had enough gas money to get here (without her help),” Pettitt said.

Mauer said her math skills were not strong — “I couldn’t get it to save my soul” — and without the help of Pettitt, she almost certainly would have dropped out.

At construction sites, Pettitt says she gets a lot of doors opened for her by her male counterparts as a courtesy to her womanhood, but both say they are generally treated as one of the guys.

Sometimes, it’s hard not to get noticed as the lone woman at a job site. While working at Mayo Clinic Hospital, Saint Marys Campus, Pettitt recalled the enthusiastic reception of a patient’s wife when she saw her outfitted in hardhat, tool belt and work shirt.

“She was cheering down the hallway at me,” she said.