

Local 290 members say it's time to talk about diversity

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By Don McIntosh

It's the third Tuesday of March, and 16 plumbers and pipefitters sit at a circle of tables at the front of a giant meeting hall in Tualatin, telling stories. The subject is race and gender, and why so few women and minorities join — or remain — in United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 290. It's the monthly meeting of the United Association Diversity Committee. Anthony O'Neal Jr., an African-American journeyman pipefitter, is the chair.

Local 290 is a massive union of 4,400 members, enough to populate a city half the size of Astoria, Oregon. And yet O'Neal can name nearly every black member without running out of fingers and toes. Women, too, are rare. Latinos, common in some other construction trades, are less so in the pipe trades.

Nor is that on track to change soon: 95 percent of today's Local 290 apprentices are men, and 88 percent are white. Of the 554 current Local 290 apprentices, just six are African American, 10 are Asian or Pacific Islanders, 16 Native Americans, and 26 Hispanic; 30 are women.

The idea to create a diversity committee was born in an on-the-job conversation O'Neal had with Lou Christian in December 2017. O'Neal was the foreman on the job. Christian, then running for business manager (the local's top elected office), was on his crew. Christian made the issue part of his [campaign](#), pledging to work so that members of all races and genders feel welcome and supported in the union. He [won](#), and the committee was formed last summer.

Lack of diversity isn't just a fact at Local 290, but across the building trades. According to 2016 [data](#) from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women are less than 2 percent of the skilled craft workers in construction nationwide, and blacks are less than 7 percent.

At Local 290, members of the Diversity Committee hope to change that. They want to recruit more women and minority workers into the union, support them when they get there, and encourage them to become active in the local. The committee is open to all members, not just women and minorities. White men, like retired former business rep Don Kool, are active in the committee.

One reason the union remains overwhelmingly white is that those who hear about the apprenticeship program are often relatives of those already in the trade. O'Neal didn't have that pipeline, and had to find his own way. He got the phone numbers of two union contractors and called them every other day trying to get in. That was 2006. Five years of apprenticeship later, he was a journeyman pipefitter. O'Neal prides himself on bringing professionalism to every job, but over the years he's had to contend with inappropriate treatment from some co-workers — from racist jokes and derogatory comments to being called “boy.”

“That’s unprofessional. And people who it doesn’t happen to don’t understand it,” he said.

It’s a history echoed by fellow Diversity Committee member Lela Brown, a journeyman plumber who joined Local 290 in 2004. Brown loves the physical aspect of the work itself, and enjoys working as part of a team to get the job done. But she also faced disparate treatment and systematic workplace harassment. As an apprentice, she was kept busy cleaning and sweeping for months while a brand-new white male apprentice was put to work putting in pipe. Male co-workers suggested that she was only on the job because of quotas, or might be there to make money in a lawsuit. Others made gross sexual comments, joked about domestic violence, left porn in front of her on the lunch table, and talked in front of her about the bodies of women walking by. She eventually notified her general foreman about what she was being subjected to, and was laid off soon after.

“There’s this idea that we all have to have thick skin and put up with it,” Brown says. “That does a disservice to our craft. Some of the best tradespeople aren’t going to put up with cruelty or being mocked for their identity. We are tough, but that doesn’t mean we can’t support each other and learn how to respect each other more.”

Brown also experienced solidarity on the job over the years, and benefited from coaching and support from other male co-workers.

She and O’Neal hope the Diversity Committee can help improve their union’s culture.

“My goal is to discuss these uncomfortable things that need to be discussed,” O’Neal said.

“It’s not about policing people’s language, or trying to change who our fellow union members are,” Brown says. “We don’t want to silence people. We want people to grow ...What we’re trying to achieve is pretty basic, to be treated with respect in the workplace.”

Christian, the business manager, is in solid agreement. Attending Diversity Committee meetings, he says it hurt to hear what members had experienced. He says Local 290 needs to be a place where people from all different backgrounds feel at home.

“I believe our local needs the change, and there isn’t any doubt about that,” he says.