

# Life's "Rosie" for Women in Construction

By Molly Cochran

The first wave of women entered the building trades briefly during World War II under the emblem of Rosie the Riveter; they were laid off after the "boys" returned home. Women weren't allowed entry into the trades again until the 1970s. Today women account for less than 3% of the construction workforce. It's still unusual to find a woman running her own construction company, but here are five women-owned businesses that prove women's strength in the field.

Charlene Getchell worked as a union carpenter for seven years, and in March, she set out on her own, opening Getchell Construction in NE Portland. Her business card proudly displays Rosie the Riveter who is, for Getchell, "The symbol of the woman's revolution in the workplace."



Charlene Getchell of Getchell Construction

Barbara Standard, of Jill of All Trades based in SW Portland, has been in the business since 1975. She began restoring Victorian homes in NW Portland and now does "anything and everything" that remodeling work requires from stonework to finish carpentry.



Barbara Standard, of Jill of All Trades

Standard came of age when Benson High School, a Portland Public School that teaches the trades, was an all-boys' school, and girls were required to take sewing and home economics. "We weren't allowed to take automotive and shop," Standard recalls.

Times have changed. "I don't think it's a surprise to see a woman doing much of anything anymore," Standard says.

A career in construction suited Karen Hoyt and Victoria Sleeman, co-founders of A Woman's Touch: Repair and Remodeling, LLC in Troutdale. "We both like working with our hands, building things, fixing things," Hoyt explains.

The pair is proudly "pet-friendly," and they carry treats as well as tools in their truck. Sleeman notes that 95% of A Woman's Touch customers are women, many who are single moms or elderly women. Their customers feel more comfortable inviting women into their homes to do repair or remodeling work.

Though women have made gains in nontraditional fields, they still face old stereotypes about their capabilities. On occasion, customers of Cricket's Plumbing in Hillsboro have expressed concern that Cricket Crockett, a petite and agile plumber, will not have the strength to replace a heavy water heater. Crockett answers their fears, "I tell them 'I may be small, but I'm mighty.'"

Getchell explains the pressure women face in construction, "When a woman makes a mistake, it's because she's a woman not because she's human..Women have to constantly prove themselves over and over and over again."

Getchell continues to prove her own skills and takes great pride in



Karen Hoyt and Victoria Sleeman, of A Woman's Touch: Repair and Remodeling, LLC

what she builds. She finds herself "driving around town saying, 'I built this; I built that.' All your family and friends kind of get sick of it. But all carpenters are like that, and electricians and plumbers."

The satisfaction of a job well done is only one of the reasons women follow a nontraditional path to careers in construction. Construction offers high-paying, highly skilled careers - and a chance to escape tedious office work.



Michelle Startt left the world of architecture, where she focused on bathroom and kitchen design, for the hands-on work of restoring claw foot bathtubs. Startt says, "I couldn't stand eight hours in front of the computer."

Startt, along with business partner, Amy Smith, founded Restoration Tub and Tile in Sellwood, and the two have been in business for a little over a year. Smith admits that beginning a home improvement project can be "intimidating" for women, but she believes women equal men in skill when working on any job with any tool, "from a paintbrush to a power saw."

Michelle Startt and Amy Smith Restoration Tub and Tile Sleeman revels in her ability to demonstrate how capable women are, "I love proving those who say that we can't, wrong."

Crockett nurtures the next Rosies. She leads hands-on workshops for girls through Trades Offer Girls Options, a program of Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. (OTI). OTI, a nonprofit based in Portland, offers support for women seeking trades careers and women in the field. Crockett wishes she had explored the trades as a girl. "I would have done this coming out of high school. I would have really gotten into it if I had known stuff like this was even available."

*For more information about TO GO or trades career opportunities, contact Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc.: 503-335-8200.*