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Women in Plumbing



Sisters in the Building Trades president Melina Harris on a remodeling job at Safeco Plaza in downtown Seattle. Photo courtesy of Melina Harris.

Even positioning. "Women sit, men kneel," Harris said, so men need kneepads and women are already...padded. "And they're not going to have the testosterone needing thing [of], 'I can lift that,'" she added. "They're going to go get a forklift or a dolly or a jack to pick it up if it's too heavy, which is what all of the agencies for safety have been recommending because of all of the injuries."

Harris contends that women get *in* to the business at a pretty good rate, they just don't stay.

"They feel terribly uncomfortable—"There's 20 guys and me," she said. Then there's the burden of representing the whole gender. "I'm not allowed to make a mistake on the job and all the guys are," Harris said. "They could cut 3,000 things wrong; I make one miscut, they pin it to the wall and put my name on it." And, she said, word spreads. "Everybody in the building is watching because they know where the women are. There's only two on the job site. It's like being a purple monkey. And so there's a lot of intense pressure with that."

Harris is the first woman her company has hired in 10 years. "Women in the trades are still rare. I'm a carpenter. I have *never* worked with another [female journeyman] carpenter on a job," she said. Nevertheless, Harris concluded that when women succeed, they do enjoy the work. "They are good paying jobs with family benefits and women are quite capable of them."

Nancy Jones

The woman plumber on the truck remains a rarity, but the gender is rather well represented on the association side. Jo Wagner recently completed her term as PHCC's (second female) president, for example. And a woman currently heads the busy APHCC-Texas chapter in Austin. Executive director Nancy Jones, who has worked in association management since 1984, said she's always been treated with respect. "Our contractors are some of the nicest, most courteous men I have ever met."

Jones has noticed an influx of younger people entering the field but is working to attract more women. "We are starting a new state apprentice program this spring—a whole new approach to apprenticeship training that will entice more young people to participate."

The former teacher speculated on why there aren't more females coming in. "Women don't realize that they CAN perform this work if they are strong and have good technical skills," Jones said. "It's



Nancy Jones is executive director of the Texas chapter of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association, a group with a healthy representation of women. Photo courtesy of APHCC Texas.