

Women construction workers turn to their 'Sisters'

■ *Sisters in the Building Trades provides mentoring and encouragement for women working in the trades.*

By **LYNN PORTER**
Journal Staff Writer

KANDY PAULSON moved to Seattle in 1994 with her three daughters and started working traffic control on construction sites.

She made about \$23 an hour for the four years she worked for her mother's company.

"It was the first time in my entire life that I was able to raise my children by myself with no assistance whatsoever," she said.

When her mom closed up shop, Paulson didn't want to give up the good pay. So she got her commercial driver's license and for the past seven years she has driven a dump truck. She now works for Hos Bros. Construction of Woodinville and makes \$25 an hour, plus benefits.

Paulson is also on the executive board of Sisters in the Building Trades, which started locally in 2005. The 125-member nonprofit organization's goal is to increase the number of women in the construction trades, including carpenters, ironworkers, electricians,

plumbers and heavy equipment operators.

The group is trying to do so through mentoring at the apprentice level and working with construction trade organizations to recruit women. It also provides speakers at job fairs to increase awareness of construction careers for females. Members volunteer on building projects, including those of Habitat for Humanity.

The group encourages its members to get training that will help them get jobs or get better jobs. That can include foreman

and superintendent training, as well as learning how to operate a boom lift, read blueprints and use computer-aided drafting software.

Women need the training because they have to be better than men to get and keep the same job, said Sisters in the Building Trades President Melina Harris.

"It's going to be that way for the next 100 years. We're working on it," she said.

According to the National Association of Women in Construction, there were nearly 7.3 million construction workers in this country in 1995. Of those, 6.4 million were men and about 880,000 were women. Most of those women worked in sales or office positions, NAWIC said, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics.

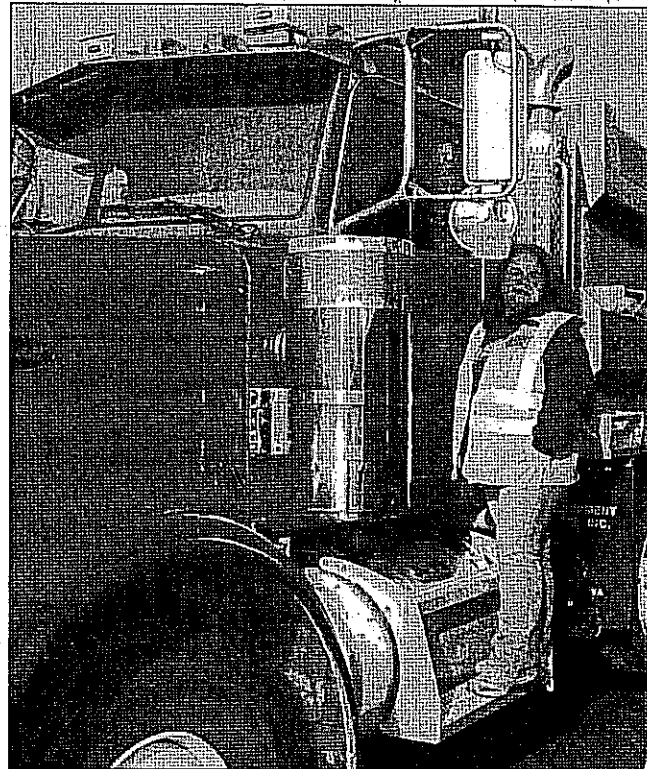
Additionally, NAWIC said that, according to a 1999 Occupational Safety & Health Administration study, women made up less than 1 percent of construction workers in 1970, and only 2.3 percent by 1995. NAWIC didn't have more current figures.

Sisters in the Building Trades, citing state Department of Labor and Industries statistics, said there were 14,055 active building trade apprentices in Washington for the 12-month period ending Dec. 31, 2006, of which 1,850 were women and 3,104 were minorities.

Mentoring by Sisters members may involve something as simple as shopping for tools with an apprentice. Or it may involve giving advice on how to do a job or how to deal with the fact that the apprentice is the only or one of the few women on a site, Harris said.

"Quite often the men feel that we're invading the job site," she said.

A trade job offers women a "living wage" that can start at \$13 to \$17 an hour plus benefits, said Harris.



Kandy Paulson was able to raise her three daughters by herself, thanks to high-paying construction jobs such as driving this Peterbilt dump truck for Hos Bros. Construction.

Photo courtesy of Sisters in the Building Trades

"Women work a lot of dirty jobs and they don't get paid (enough) for it," she said. "They might as well be getting dirty and getting paid very well."

Harris said now is a good time for women and minorities to make inroads because many people in the trades are retiring and there is lots of work going on. Overall, the construction industry doesn't have enough people in jobs from electricians to carpenters and cement masons, she said.

Being a dump truck driver has helped Paulson, now married and living in Carnation, raise her children in a comfortable manner.

But it's not easy to log hundreds of miles a day in a 75-foot-long dump truck and trailer, which

typically has 18 gears and doesn't stop on a dime.

"We have to pay attention all the time we're carrying around generally 105,000 pounds," she said.

Paulson, who is 5 feet tall, said she still get stares when people realize it's a woman driving the truck.

She said working conditions for women in the building trades are getting better, but there's still a long way to go.

"I think we have to prove ourselves everyday," she said. "We have to prove that we can do it just as well as a man can."

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