

Tales from the Trenches

by Beth Szillagyi

I like sheet metal. I like the idea that you can take a flat piece of metal and turn it into something three-dimensional. I like hanging duct work, and I like architectural sheet metal. I like blueprints and construction sites. I like measuring up jobs. I like pick-up trucks, tools, and the feel of a new leather tool pouch. My favorite coat has a Carhartt label on it, and, yes folks, the boots are by Redwing, a fashion leader.

My momma must have dropped me on my head when I was a baby. Or tied my baby bonnet too tight. I say that (only in jest, of course) because I'm a girl, and girls aren't supposed to like that stuff! Even my then three-year-old stepson told me that one day when I was coming out of the crawl space at home during our two-year remodeling project. I believe his exact words were "Girls aren't supposed to help!"

It's funny how I ended up here – it really wasn't a matter of choice. It had to do with being born with a plastic spoon hanging out of my mouth more than anything, and I needed a job that supported me and all the bad habits I'd acquired in 22 years – like eating and needing a warm place to sleep.

Applying for a sheet metal apprenticeship back in 1979 was not for the meek at heart, but I was young and naive and had no clue about anything, especially what sheet metal workers actually did all day long. All I knew was that the ad in the paper said "women and minorities are encouraged to apply."

My life changed forever when I finally mustered up enough courage to walk through the door of Sheet Metal Worker's Local 84. I had never seen an infamous Business Agent (complete with a smelly, smoking stogey), and he, in turn, had never seen a female applicant, so at least we started off on equal ground.

Even though it's hard for me to comprehend, that day was almost 30 years ago, and I have to ask myself the eternal question: Where did the time go?! How did I get to be one of those "old timers," talking about creaking knees and twinges of the back, someone who's gone through two tinner's hammers and wore out countless stick rulers? Most of the apprentices we have now were not even BORN YET (much less a twinkle in their momma's eye) when I started, and that's a sobering thought! Shouldn't I be feeling OLD or something?

A lot of things have changed since that day, and a lot of things have stayed the same. One of the things that hasn't changed is that I'm still one of only a few women who have been desperate or insane enough to attempt construction work. I'm always asking myself why, and the only answer I can come up with is still the upbringing crap. I say that, though, then I think about the video tape my brother sent me with all of our old home movies on it: You know the one - it contains every Christmas, birthday, and family reunion since the crust of the earth was cooling, the one where Grandma is tasting the big pot of soup and Gramps sneaks up and pinches her butt, and

Dad does "trick" photography where all the neighbor kids magically run and disappear behind the tree in the backyard. I am on this video tape – a little blond haired girl, hair freshly curled (and I remember the STENCH of those permanents! Ugh!), a starched and ironed dress and frilly petticoat, shiny patent leather shoes (on which we applied Vaseline and polished every Saturday night so they'd be shiny in church) with matching purse, always smiling shyly at the camera. On this video I'm getting all the "girl" gifts: Dollies, play dishes and pots and pans, a toy stove and refrigerator, a little table and chairs and a kid-sized broom.

When my husband and I first watched this video, I remember commenting, "Jeez, dear, I survived all of that!" I also remember feeling amazed (and slightly light headed) that I HAD survived that and somehow managed to evolve in spite of it all into who I really was supposed to be.

Snippets of childhood come back to me that perhaps were omens of things to come: I cut my Skipper doll's hair. My favorite toys of all time were Jane and Johnny West, Chief Cherokee, and Thunderbolt the horse. My best buddy was a kid named Bobby. I got a pretty good spanking for stomping in mud puddles with him right after my mom got me all cleaned up to go someplace. (I still remember with a smile how hard we were laughing while we were doing it - it was definitely worth the punishment.) Bobby and I would build "cities" in my sandbox, and we were both deliciously frightened when we discovered that snakes lived underneath it. When I was old enough to go to school, I took great pleasure in the fact that I could outrun every one of the boys...and that reminds me of the softball game in third grade...

This was back when the men wore the pants, mind you. If a girl dared to wear pants to school, she was sent home to change. (No nail polish either, darn the luck!) So at lunch recess when the weather was fine, everyone would divvy up sides and head to the ball diamond. The girls were always the last to be picked, and the playground monitor was always there to insure that everyone who wanted to be on a team got on a team.

My self-elected team captain was a kid named Don. He was the kind of kid where, if he were on a construction job today, I'd have to call him a @%##^!#^&&#. Girls had cooties, were a bunch of sissies, and knew nothing at all about softball or anything else.

So, anyway, poor !#%^#^## had to stick me on first base, dress and all. He mumbled loudly about what a bad move this was, and I clearly remember thinking, "@#^&\$&@\$#, you !#%^&#\$#!"

The first kid up to bat was known to be able to really jack the ball. He had arms the size of tree trunks for crying out loud! And he had the absolute gall to smack the ball, high fly style, right at me. I was incredibly frightened watching it arc up into the sun's glare and head right toward my skull, but the last thing I heard was @^&\$&!#\$# saying, "Great! She won't catch that ball in a million years!" And I saw him, staring at the ground, shaking his head resignedly.

And I thought, "Watch this, you !^)&*((\$*%!" I was gonna catch that damn ball if it was the last thing I did! When I held my hands up in the air to make the catch, that sucker smacked the palm

of one hand, bent back a finger on the other hand, and went right up the sleeve of my dress! I pulled the ball out and shook it in the air, stinging palm all but forgotten.

Poetic, wonderful justice! (One of my favorite things.)

@#%^&@\$@ stood there astonished. It didn't take him very long to change his tune, though. After a few seconds of stunned silence, he was whoopin' and hollerin' like a banshee. "We" had caught the fly ball of a future Babe Ruth and got him out!

When @#^*%\$^# came over to congratulate me, I calmly told him to @#^%^# off.

So maybe it was way back then when all this sheet metal stuff started. Maybe I have @#^&\$@*)^ to thank for all of this?

Whatever the case may be, a big thing that has changed over the years is that no one ever questions my existence anymore. I've been around long enough where most of the guys know me and have worked with me at one point or another. I like them and they like me. We have a lot of fun on the job. I seriously wouldn't know what else to do. (They wouldn't have me back in an office job!) (I wouldn't have it any other way. I could not begin to find words to describe how good it feels.

That's not to say the road didn't have any construction going on while I was on it. There have been many times I've wondered why the hell I even bother. Since I never took any shop classes or drafting in high school, I had to teach myself. The same can be said of blueprint reading and measuring. That involved many long hours at the kitchen table, reading and drawing until I couldn't see straight. As an apprentice I remember one guy who rolled up the print and stuck it protectively under his arm, asking me what the hell was I looking at that for anyway? I remember being told at one point that bets had been placed about whether I'd finish the apprenticeship, all of them against me.

I've been on jobs by myself, wondering how on earth I was going to do whatever it was that needed to be done. I remember hanging on with one arm up in the joists and holding up one end of the duct work with my feet so I could make a connection. I learned how to use whatever was available to help me in the fight to get stuff up in the air—ladders, 2x4s, rope, pieces of angle iron and unistrut.

There have been the Good Guys and the Bad Guys. One of my favorite Bad Guy stories is about the electrician who told me I was taking away some guy's job who had a family to feed, and that "they oughta draft you dykes!" I told him he was also taking away some guy's job who had a family to feed, and they couldn't draft me because I was in the National Guard, and whether or not I was a dyke was really none of his damn business! (I was lucky that day - usually I can't think of good comebacks until a half hour later, and then I wish I could rewind time.)

Thankfully, the Good Guy stories outnumber the Bad Guy stories in massive quantities. If they didn't maybe I wouldn't be here after all. I couldn't imagine going to work every day where no one liked me, where I was some sort of pariah or whatever that word is. I hear other women's

stories about how much trouble they have, sometimes even after they've been around for years, and it saddens me. When I tell them that maybe their own attitude is their own worst enemy, they get upset with me, and I can see why they have trouble to begin with. There are no special privileges here. You have to work hard and long, and if you have to use the bathroom, well, there's the porta potty, and you shouldn't expect one of your very own. Respect has to be earned, and the only way to do that is to keep showing up, to not take "no" for an answer, to not go away.

A warped sense of humor is a necessary tool also. Forget about sexual harassment lawsuits and fight fire with fire. I've gotten into a lot of hot water over the years because other women do not agree with my tactics; however I believe it's every woman for herself out there, so when you see the infamous "girlie" pictures posted on the job site, it is your absolute duty to obtain some naked men pictures to put up right beside them. If someone calls you "honey," then call them "toots." If someone gets in your face, you can't back down either. When it becomes clear that you are not going away, that you can handle whatever comes up, then miraculously your days start getting easier. You will also find that you have a lot more supporters than you previously thought. Men may be silly creatures, but they will give credit where credit is due; it just might take some longer than others.

I have to blame my years in sheet metal mostly on attitude - pure stubbornness and the unwillingness to give up the ship. Also to blame are the guys who have been there with a smile, a pat on the back or a kick in the pants. The Good Guys and the Bad Guys have been equally motivating in their own way. (Imagine Bad Guys wringing their hands over this.)

Now I'm on the downhill side, and it's still unbelievable at times that I'm here, but I don't think it could have been any other way. I still learn something every day and every once in awhile there are pleasant surprises, and if time flies anywhere near as fast as the last 30 years have, maybe I'll be playing cards with all the other old farts at the hall!

And, speaking of pleasant surprises, you'll never guess who just started the apprenticeship last year, needing to make a career change in mid-life? It's none other than @#%&*%\$#\$, the softball king!

Talk about poetic justice! Heh heh, I can't wait until he gets on one of my jobs!