

PROVING THEIR “WOMANHOOD”

WRITTEN BY
CAROL J.
ALEXANDER

A typically male-dominated field is seeing more female participation thanks in part to school programs and plenty of initiative from women and men alike.

“I’m more of a hands-on person. I don’t belong at a desk.”

—JUSTICE WILFONG

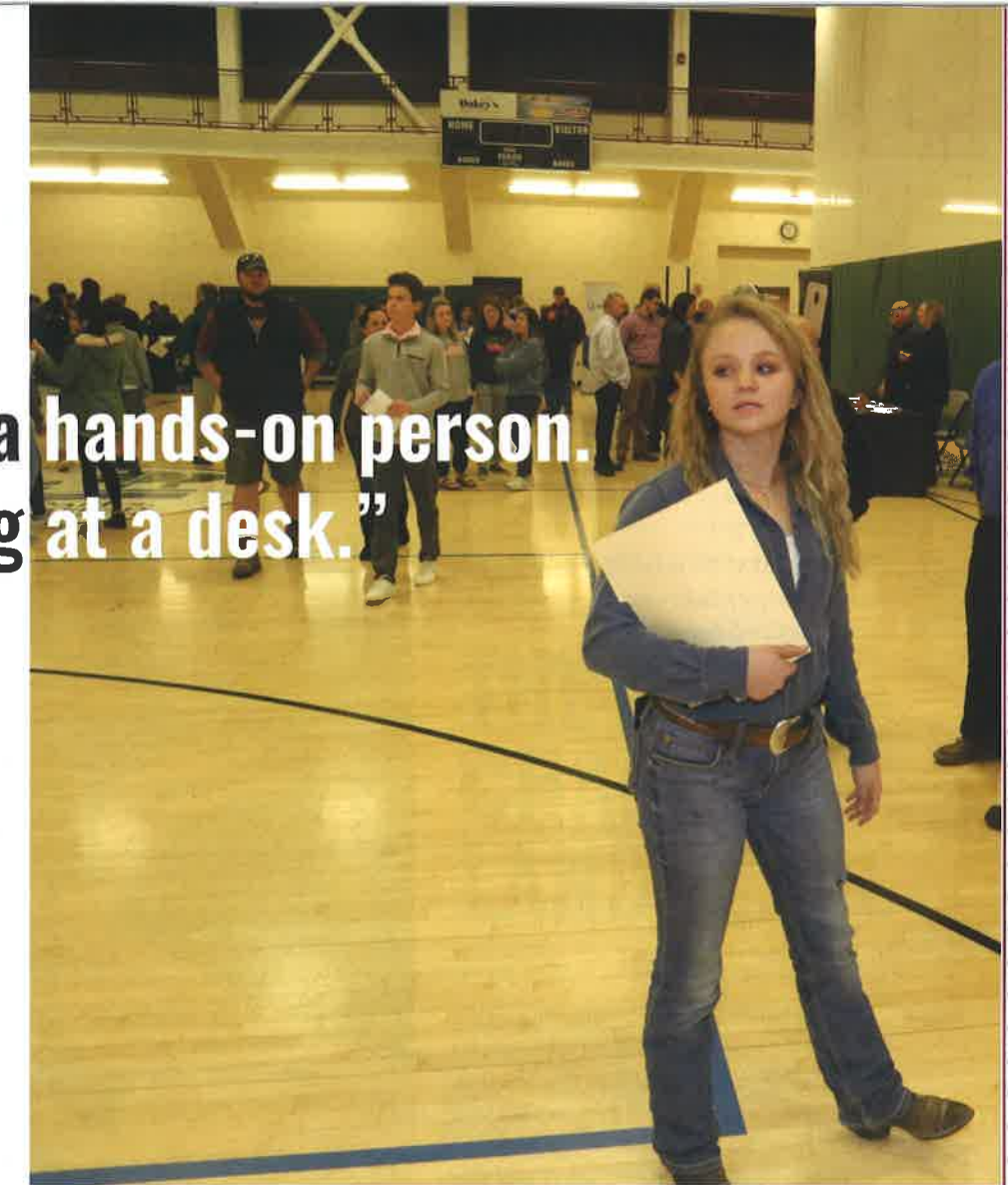
JUSTICE WILFONG, a 17-year-old Burton Center for Arts and Technology student, won third in the state at the 2018 Skills USA competition for plumbing. Skills USA pits students from technical schools across the commonwealth and the nation against each other to test skills learned in 102 different sectors of 11 categories. Those categories include everything from manufacturing and construction to information technology and health sciences. Wilfong’s instructor, Tom Shelton, knew she could place in the competition and encouraged her to enter. But that Wilfong was a student in the Building Trades Program at Burton at all was, and is, amazing.

Every eighth-grader in the Roanoke County public schools tours the Burton Center for Arts and Technology to see what the school has to offer. With Wilfong, she knew immediately she wanted to attend school there.

“I’m more of a hands-on person,” she says. “I don’t belong at a desk.”

Wilfong’s grandfather encouraged her to enter a trade.

“He said no one does it anymore,” she says, indicating that her grandfather



believed that scarcity of workers meant a good living. “And my parents were all for it.”

Other kids aren’t so fortunate. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER), 70% of parents surveyed said they would not advise their children to enter the construction industry rather than go to college.

Christian Kish, principal of Burton, has seen parental hesitancy in action. “We’ll see students during our open houses that are so excited to take their parents into various programs, not just building trades,” he says. “Unfortunately, due to their own personal biases or preconceived notions, some parents will discourage participation in the trades.”

Jimmy Dollman, principal of Dollman Construction and father of three, shakes

his head. “I can’t understand why anyone would want to spend four years getting a bachelor’s degree and go into debt to do it when they can spend the same amount of time as an apprentice and could make 50% or more annually, and incur no debt.”

Dollman’s claim may sound unbelievable, but it’s not. According to NCCER’s 2018 Construction Craft Salary Survey of over 350,000 construction employees nationwide, average base salaries are more than \$56,784 for masons, \$61,139 for commercial electricians and up to \$92,500 for project managers. Compare that with traditional female occupations and you’ll see that a registered nurse in Virginia with a bachelor’s degree earns an average salary of \$67,990 annually but generally begins her career with a median debt load between \$40,000 and \$54,999. A teacher beginning her career in Virginia averages \$40,453 annually but carries a debt load of

at least \$30,000. To make that debt burden even heavier, teachers often feel pressure to secure advanced degrees.

When a student graduates from a school like Burton, they have no debt load and, because they hold industry certifications, frequently work their way up to a competitive salary range faster than their peers took to get through college. But the question remains, do the same doors open for women as for men?

Dollman thinks yes. "There's no room in the industry to be a male chauvinist anymore."

He explains that after coming through a decade of telling our children they had to go to college, and the men in the building trades aging out, there is a serious shortage of tradespeople.

"We're not far from where you're going to pay your plumber more than your lawyer," he says. According to Dollman, labor shortages are requiring employers to accept other possibilities.

"It's not a question of whether to hire a woman over a man," he says. "It's whether or not I'll find anyone at all qualified to hire."

NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

Construction sites are no longer what you see depicted on the silver screen. The day of the stereotypical construction worker telling off-color jokes and cat-calling to any woman who dares to venture near is becoming a thing of the past.



"We have rules on our jobs," says Suzi Fortenberry, vice president of Bench Mark Builders in Roanoke and past president of the Roanoke Regional Home Builders Association. "We have a high standard and don't allow language. And, we let the subs know that at the get-go," she says.

Fortenberry stresses the importance of a professional image, particularly in the home building and remodeling arena, because you never know when a homeowner will walk onsite. "When our plumber's wife started working with him," Fortenberry says, "she really raised the bar" as far as conduct on the job site went. You have to ask, though, how was she treated by the men?

The nightly news reveals that no industry

is a safe haven for women. But because of standards like Fortenberry's and her plumber's, improvements are happening in the building trades.

"I've felt it," says Alicia Smith, director of marketing and development with F&S Building Innovations, of condescension from men toward women on the job site. "But I never let it phase me."

Smith's father founded F&S in 1976 building homes on Smith Mountain Lake. Since then, the company has grown to include both a residential and commercial division. Smith frequently accompanied her father to job sites growing up. She says that a woman in the building industry simply does her best and earns the respect of her male counterparts.

yourself. That hard work, in turn, makes you more than qualified for the job."

"It's a male-dominated industry because of our mindset, not because of the industry itself," Dollman says. Women are more detail-oriented and good at artisan work because they understand aesthetics. Building cabinetry, trim work and installing flooring all require such an understanding.

Fortenberry agrees that women excel in the trades. "We're seeing more women," she says, "but I'd like to see more. Women can do anything men can do. In Ireland, I saw women running excavators."

She also noted that if a woman struggles with a physical task on the job, like lifting something heavy, the men are more than willing to assist when there's mutual respect and teamwork.

Thaisjana Bailey, another 17-year-old Burton student, says, "Sometimes guys will want to take over and do something for me because they're guys. But I just tell them, 'I need to prove my womanhood.'" Bailey's father works in the construction industry but she didn't want to be a "mini version" of him, so she chose the automotive field.

"There needs to be a light shined on the fact that trades aren't just for guys," she says.

talents and passion with a profession can have a profound impact on income and mental health." He goes on to explain that if a student has a passion for plumbing but a parent coerces them to pursue a four-year degree that doesn't interest them, the parent has hindered the child's future earning potential and happiness.

"He should make more as a highly-skilled plumber," he says, "than as an average middle manager and would be happier and more fulfilled doing what he enjoys and is good at."

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

If we don't see more women in building trades because of mindset, as Dollman says, what will change that? Dollman, like Smith's father, takes his daughter, 11-year-old Sophia, to work.

"She's seen the process from design to build," he says. "I have two sons but she's taken the most interest. She's interested in the environmental impact of a design and likes to learn how to use reclaimed products."

In the process of building his own home, Dollman encouraged Sophia to design her own ballet studio in the basement. She's been taking ballet for eight years and Dollman knew she had the eye and the aptitude for the job. Not only did she create the design, she also assisted with painting, flooring and the barre installation.

Kish thinks more media coverage of female successes would help shift the mindset. Dollman believes that exposure, coupled with counseling advice, is needed. Smith asserts women in the field need to use their voice to inspire other women.

That's just what Justice Wilfong and Thaisjana Bailey are doing. They recently agreed to speak out on behalf of the program through the school's social media channels. After all, that's where future students would hear the call. ☆

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE?

The message that women are welcomed in the building trades is slow coming. The current enrollment of female students in the Building Trades program at Burton is five. According to Kish, that's up from three the last three school years. However, they've had 19 female students apply for the 2020-21 school year.

Burton's administrative team interviews every applicant to discover their motives and strives to get the right students in the right classes for the right reasons, says Kish. They encourage each student to pursue their own passions, not follow along with their peers.

"Evidence proves," he says, "that aligning

ARE WOMEN SUITED TO BUILDING TRADES?

Kish says that work ethic makes women a good fit for the building industry.

"When you're a woman in a trade," he says, "you have to work harder to prove