

## **Success stories of female service techs. (Business Management).**

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Their numbers are small but their desire to succeed is not. Undaunted by the unofficial label given to field mechanics in any profession -- "a man's job" -- there are undoubtedly many success stories of female technicians throughout all trades. The hvacr trade is no exception.

The News has explored this topic in previous issues, with mixed results. The most recent story was about refrigeration tech Shabretta Manning, who works at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, TX (The News, Aug. 13, 2001). Manning's is a success story, having worked her way into a supervisory position in a short period of time. She loves her work.

There are many more positive stories about women in hvacr. Here are a few.

### **ANGIE'S STORY**

Angie Lapham is a member of Steamfitters Local 636 in Troy, MI. She is in her fourth year of a five-year apprenticeship program at the Pipefitters Training Center.

Lapham was one of 40 women who worked at a Habitat for Humanity home-building project in Inkster, MI. She learned about the project, sponsored by the Love Light Foundation, at a "Women in Construction" seminar.

Lapham joined two other members of the local at the home. Each put in a full day's work, voluntarily.

"It was for a great cause, and we helped out where we needed to be," she said. Her job consisted of hooking up the hot water tank and running gas lines from the basement to the kitchen and dryer. Other volunteers worked on the heating system, drywall, flooring, and siding.

"It turned out that my company decided to pay me for the day's work anyway," Lapham joked. But pay or not, she would be happy to do it again if given the opportunity. She just would like to see more skilled women on the jobsite.

"There were some women that didn't have a clue what to do -- they needed us," she said. "It would have been great if there had been an all-union crew"

### **DEB'S JOURNEY TO TEXAS**

Debbie Huether-Carney had spent 20 years as a field technician in Rochester, NY. She was good at what she did and liked what she was doing. So it was no surprise when she expressed disappointment when her husband got a job transfer to Dallas. She liked her company and her customers -- and didn't relish the thought of relocating.

After telling her story to The News, she was given several leads to hvacr contractors in the Dallas area who indicated they might be looking for experienced techs.

Carney became a hot commodity as soon as she hit the Lone Star state. She eventually decided on Kahn Mechanical in Dallas.

Carney said it wasn't because of the compensation offered that she took the job with Kahn. It was that she was offered the opportunity to move into sales after spending time in the field.

"I am truly loving my job with the Kahn family," she said. "I also attended the 'Women in Technology Expo' in Houston, the first of its kind at North Harris College."

Carney has also volunteered to work in the North Texas ACCA Chapter's "Heat the Town" program. The program involves contractors who volunteer to inspect and repair heating systems for elderly or disabled Dallas/Fort Worth residents.

"I had to call home [after volunteering] to inquire why we haven't done something like this in upstate New York," Carney said.

## **BILLIE IS SHARP**

Her name is Billie Sharpe. She was hired to work for Keith Heating & Cooling, Tallmadge, OH. She began as an installer and it wasn't long before she launched into other things.

Owner Keith Goodwin commented, "Billie didn't want a 'girly-girl' job. Within a year and a half she was working in the field on clean and inspects. She has been a full-blown mechanic for five years, right after she completed her associate's degree at night school."

Goodwin said that his older female customers ask for Sharpe now because they trust her. "Guys like fixing things -- it's a mechanic's mentality," said Goodwin. "Billie takes the customer's thoughts into consideration. She thinks like they think, like if the equipment is safe or not."

Goodwin said that Sharpe "sells more residential replacement equipment, hands down, than anyone else." He added that Sharpe can do almost anything the male techs can do, including the heavy work.

"Lifting requires common sense," he said. "It isn't necessarily a male/female thing."

Goodwin has been happy with Sharpe's work and he'd love to see others like her. "In my opinion, women work harder," he said. "If I had another woman come in to apply who has mechanical ability, I'd hire her in a heartbeat."

## COMPANY OWNER

She went from installer to service tech to owner of the company. Her lofty goals were achieved because of her love for the hvacr trade. Lucy Walters is president of Comfort Solutions, Inc., in Illinois.

"I have been in the business for 16 years and I totally love what I do," Walters said. "It is a very mentally and physically rewarding job that I constantly need to keep up on, e.g., new codes."

Walters said that she does not employ any female techs in her company, partly because of the small population base and because she believes "Not too many women seem to be interested in the trade."

Walters has gone to a local vo-tech school to talk with women about the hvacr field, but she said that the school does not offer any hvac courses. She would gladly volunteer to be a spokesperson for the trade. "I would love to be a voice to get more females in this area."

She also joked, "Besides, the engineers that have designed all of this equipment must have had women in mind -- I don't see how some big-pawed guys can get their hands into some of the areas to work on those machines!"

## CONTRACTORS' OPINIONS

Matthew Prazenka, vice president of operations for Northern Weathermakers Inc., Northbrook, IL, said he wishes he could find female technicians for his company's residential service customers.

"I have a standing order to all trade schools to refer all female students [in the top 50%] for an interview," he said. "I have had two female technicians in the past and the most recent has received a large number of compliments from customers."

Prazenka said that physiology and gender bias are still big reasons why female technicians are scarce.

"We always are concerned with personal safety and security issues; we have to make sure we have and enforce a solid sexual harassment policy -- without exception.

"I believe that a female is typically a better listener," he said, "and can extract the real problem from a client vs. just finding symptoms of the problem."

Prazenka said his company is trying to groom a young woman for a service tech position and welcomes the opportunity to train more female techs.

"With the limited number of people looking at getting into this field, we must open doors to other resources," he said. "We need to encourage more women to look into this vocation and eliminate the negative stereotypes associated with our industry."

"I would love to have a female service mechanic work for me in my group of 26 field mechanics," said Jerry Hurwitz of J&J Air Conditioning, San Jose, CA. "The problem is, I think there are less than five female mechanics in the whole San Francisco Bay area."

Hurwitz believes that even though the hvacr trade has opened its doors to women, neither sex has made changes in the traditional occupations.

"Besides, the trades are not cool to get into, like police or fire work," he said. "So if you are not going to be traditional, why not do something that is cool?"