



NYDCC Leadership + Sisters in the Brotherhood = An Unstoppable Force



A Brief Herstory of Women in the UBC

In December of 2006 at a NYDCC Women's Committee meeting a panel of remarkable Sisters who paved and hammered the way for all women who would come after them, spoke to the NEXT generation of female union carpenters, those that will carry the torch for women carpenters of New York into the next millennium.

All attendees at this meeting learned plenty of history relative to the struggles and hard times of these brave Sisters. We also learned that our current leadership's support of all "sisters in construction" is strong and growing and representative of the true essence of equality. If not for our leadership and these women who laid the groundwork for our success, we would definitely not be where we are today.

In the beginning, there was Connie

Women have always played a critical role within the labor movement. During war time,

as the majority of predominantly male wage earners were sent overseas, thousands of women entered the trades and became union workers. These women were faced with inhumane working conditions and abuse, but they were not afraid to fight back. They were integral in keeping the unions strong.

The Carpenters Union admitted women into its ranks as far back as 1918, but it was not until the mid 1950's, however, that women became "official" members of the UBC, thereby enjoying all the benefits the Union had to offer.

While there were 8,864 female members in the United Brotherhood of Carpenters in 1957, New York's family of Carpenters gained its first sister, Connie Reyes, in 1978.

Prior to 1978, Sister Reyes was an activist and single mother of two. Originally, she fought for the rights of minority men who wanted access to jobs on big union construction sites. Eventually, despite wide-sweeping opposition to her, Connie finally got her own



construction job by simply walking onto a site that she knew was hiring and demanding work. The foreman refused at first, but eventually gave in and handed her a broom. Not one to be easily humiliated or daunted, she took the broom and gave that job everything she had in her. She also immediately tried to sign up with the Union but was refused. As has always been her way, she persisted and in 1978, she became the first female apprentice at the New York City Carpenters Labor



Technical College. Connie remembers, "The attitude of the teachers towards me was great. I wanted to learn and they wanted to teach me." The male students were initially in shock having her around, but they adjusted over time.

Keeping up with the times

Times are changing and our Union is changing with the times. While the doors to the Union were not exactly flung open for pioneer Sisters like

Connie, today New York is actively bringing women into our family of carpenters.

Our present Executive Secretary-Treasurer, Michael Forde actively supports the continued integration of women into our Union. Brother Forde has initiated active, ongoing education specifically for women to increase membership and address recruitment and retention concerns. As a result, one can tour jobsites throughout the city and find Shop Stewards, Superintendents, Forepeople and Construction Managers with more than a union card in common; they also happen to be women AND skilled union carpenters.

The council-wide supported NYCDCC Woman's Committee, formed in 2002, holds quarterly meetings and facilitates active and effective union membership. A successful mentoring program initiated by this committee in 2006 has proved beneficial to mentees and mentors alike.

One very visible and reinforcing example of our Union leaders' support is Elly Spicer, a carpenter for more than two decades, who was elected as the first female Delegate to the District Council representing Local 608 in 2006.

More Changes to Come...

In 1980, there were only about thirty (30) women in the New York District Council.



Today, the District Council is home to over 400 active sisters. Further progress along this road is inevitable, as today the UBC represents almost 20,000 women throughout the country, with our apprentice program comprised of over 10% women.

In most recent years, the New York City District Council of Carpenters has also partnered with various women-driven organizations, including Nontraditional Employment for Women (N.E.W.). One initiative from this partnership was the creation of a pre-apprentice program to increase the number of women in the District Council Apprenticeship Program.

As our Union and our Sisterhood progress together, one thing is a comforting constant: Women have the complete backing of our Union's leaders and members. Our sisters look forward to continuing participation as rank and file members and gaining representation in leadership.

Remember: "A woman's place is in her union." As we head into March, which is Women's History Month, it is especially relevant and important to thank Michael J. Forde, Peter Thomassen, Denis Sheil and all our past and present sisters and brothers for their compassion, their integrity and their commitment to welcoming all people into the greatest of all families—our Union.