

Reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act:
Education for the 21st Century Workforce

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Witness:

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Non Traditional Employment for Women, New York, NY

Journeywoman and Instructor

Testimony

Good Morning Chairman Gregg, Senator Kennedy, Chairman Enzi, Senator Murray, and other members of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss the issue of nontraditional employment in the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Act.

My name is Angela Olszewski. I am a member of Local Union No.7, Tile, Marble & Terrazzo of NY & NJ. My Local belongs to the International Union of Bricklayers & Allied Craftworkers. I am a union Tile-Setter, a Tradeswomen's Advocate & Educator, and a 1999 graduate of a Blue Collar Prep program with Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) in New York City.

I came here today to tell you that the only way that I was able to get into an apprenticeship with Local No.7 was because of the training, support, and assistance of NEW. I found out about NEW in 1995, from friends who thought I would be a good match for working in the building trades, but at that time you had to be collecting unemployment or be on public assistance in order to be enrolled at NEW. That was not my situation and, so I kept NEW in the back of my mind and I continued working jobs which paid between \$8-\$12 an hour. I came to NEW in 1999, after being laid off from a Seasonal Clerical Associates position with New York City's Parks & Recreation Department. When the season was over, I took my lay-off and my soon to be unemployment assistance and I went straight to NEW, and enrolled in their Blue Collar Prep program.

I was so excited about entering NEW's program, and I knew that my life was going to be changed by this opportunity. The program ran full-time for 12 weeks. I learned about current opportunities in the building trades. I gained confidence in my abilities in the shop class. I practiced entrance exams and interviews. I improved my physical conditioning, and I felt solidly determined to get into the tile setter's union.

In my case, NEW had to broker a deal with a union contractor and a union official in order to secure an apprenticeship for me. It was known that this contractor had gotten a job in which the project labor agreement required quotas for the number of women and people of color to be employed. I made my application with the local and through NEW's persistence & persuasion the union and the contractor decided to give me a chance. I was accepted into the union's 12-week pre-job tile training program at a facility in Long

Island City. I was the only woman in my class, and except for the secretary, I was the only woman at the entire training facility, which also ran pre-job training programs in Marble, Brick, Restoration, & Stone Crafts.

I was accepted into the tile setter apprenticeship in 2000, and in 2001, while I was still an apprentice, I was appointed to my International Union's Women's Task Force. The mission of the Task Force is to propose policy suggestions for the better recruitment and retention of women in the BAC. In 2002, I worked with Tradeswomen Now and Tomorrow at the Building & Construction Trades Conference here in Washington, DC. I have also worked with a program called Construction Skills 2000, which discusses careers in the building trades to high school age girls and boys in the NYC public school system.

In 2003, I completed my apprenticeship, and for the past two years I have also been employed part-time as the Job Readiness Instructor for NEW's evening training program. In my class, I share my strategies for completing a successful apprenticeship. I have spoken to hundreds of women who have trained for careers in the building trades. The material in my class is prepared straight out of my experience as a tradeswoman. I cover topics such as dealing with isolation, sexual harassment, and how to effectively monitor the progress of your apprenticeship to make sure you are getting access to skills when training on the job.

These high-skill, high wage jobs are very rewarding. I have worked on the new construction of many high rise luxury hotels & residences. I have installed marble bathrooms and granite kitchens. I have worked with cement and quarry tiles in large restaurant kitchens. I have even installed glass mosaic tiles inside a swimming pool. My financial rewards from this career are incredible to me. I joke to my friends that I now pay in taxes the amount I used to earn for a living. Let me take you through my annual income for the past 4 years as a tile setter. First Year Apprentice: \$18,000. Second Year Apprentice: \$32,000. Third Year Apprentice: \$46,000. Journeyworker: \$55,000.

In recognizing how extremely challenging it can be for women to enter these fields, it is with deep gratitude to NEW that I am dedicated to the work I do on construction sites, as an activist, and as an instructor. NEW has been around for 25 years, but unfortunately the obstacles and conditions, which prevent women from entering and succeeding in these careers, still exist. Graduates of NEW constitute the majority of women hard hats in New York City. Without NEW's services, most of these women would not be in the skilled trades, and neither would I.

Many of the men that I work with have family in the construction business, who provide significant assistance to their entry into the trades and allow them to bypass some of the formal requirements. However, few women are able to enter the trades this way – their path is often much more difficult. I have seen men brought right into this industry, and I have seen women fill out an application only to be told to wait & maybe we will get back to you.

In the summer of 2001, my International Union participated in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival here in DC. I was invited to be part of a living exhibit called The Masters of the Building Trades. We demonstrated our crafts while people stepped forward to ask questions about it. I was so proud to be there, because I showed every little girl who passed by, one more choice in her life.