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Vermont Works for Women

Published May 2, 2008

By Joyce L. Carroll

With Rosie the Riveter as their inspiration, women brought determination and skill to the industrial workforce during World War II. Unfortunately, however, these early pioneers were the first to lose their jobs as men returned home from the war. The opportunity wouldn't come again until the Carter administration mandated government contractors to hire a percentage of women for construction-related jobs. Today, thanks to organizations like Vermont Works for Women (VWW), females are back in that workforce in ever-increasing numbers.

Whether it is from its original birthplace within the CEDO offices in Burlington, Park Street in Essex Junction, or in Winooski, VWW has introduced females of all ages to careers previously dominated by men two decades. To date, approximately 1,475 women have gone through the organization's Step-Up program. A recent move from Essex Junction to the Winooski Community Center ensures that the organization will serve even more women. Calling it a great fit for the program, VWW Executive Director Tiffany Bluemle said the move makes existing partnerships with organizations like the YMCA easier to manage. Bluemle also said VWW is looking forward to forging new relationships with the agencies that share the building in order to provide even greater opportunities for Winooski's diverse population. The office has doubled in size allowing for greater in-house instruction and resource-oriented services.

Originally operating as Northern New England Tradeswomen, the organization changed its name two years ago to better reflect the full scope of services provided. Despite the change in name, the non-profit has had at its heart since its inception, a mission statement that strives to "help women and girls explore, pursue and excel in nontraditional careers that pay a livable wage." Today, numerous communities throughout Vermont and beyond have replicated VWW's middle-school program, Rosie's Girls, and its Step-up for Women pre-apprenticeship program. Accolades have come from local entities like the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce as well as larger agencies like the Vermont Governor's Commission on Women, and the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration.

What makes the non-profit so successful, said Bluemle, are its flexibility and ability to partner with other community organizations. "We have had some really good partners over the years, many who have stuck by us with funding and advice ... Nothing that we've done, have we done alone," Bluemle said. The non-profit collaborates with a host of trade organizations, public sector agencies, and private businesses. As one example, a modular home construction program that takes place at the South Eastern State Correctional Facility, has 65 partners alone. The program is one of several skills advancement opportunities VWW runs for incarcerated women. A sampling of partnering organizations that work along with some of VWW's other programs includes the Center for Technology in Essex, Mercy Connections, Vermont Department of Corrections, and The Vermont Department of Labor, Associated General Contractors.

Jayne Sheridan, VWW's deputy director, said it was through their experience with incarcerated women, a group that transitions through the prison system sporadically, that one of its more popular programs, Step-Up, was streamlined several years ago to accommodate working women.

"It (Step-Up) was originally set up to be a pre-apprenticeship program. Then women went into apprenticeships or job training programs. It was originally 13 weeks, but is now anywhere from six to eight weeks and is offered on nights and weekends," she said. The changes better

accommodate a female workforce that might not have the flexibility during their nine-to-five day to attend an intensive training program. Also, in response to these demands, the Step-Up program is targeted to specific trades like painting, carpentry, or highway construction. Step-Up to Law Enforcement, one of the organization's newest options is the only pre-law enforcement program available in the country.

Women who have gone through the Step-Up program are, by and large, are successfully finding jobs and staying in their new careers. VWW boasts a career retention rate of between 75 and 84 percent. When women leave their chosen field, the number one reason they cite is isolation, followed by an industry that has been traditionally slow to adapt to the challenges of family life. Still, both women said the market is wide-open and growing, and emerging fields like renewable energy are creating new and exciting opportunities.

Empowerment must begin early, Bluemle and Sheridan agree. VWW's youth oriented programs are an essential link to building both confidence and skill for the next generation of women interested in the trades or other traditionally male-dominated fields. "We've got to do it at a younger age. We can't keep playing catch up at 30," said Sheridan, as Bluemle added, "It just amazes me how many incredibly smart, talented women with ambition don't pursue their dreams. The demands of caretaking are pretty significant, and those demands will always come first," she said. This training is a critical transitional piece for women entering non-traditional fields, but one that is becoming harder and harder to support, she added, given changes in federal funding. (While VWW once relied almost exclusively on public funding, now just 30 percent comes from public sources. The remainder comes from grants, private donors, consulting and franchise fees).

VWW offers several youth opportunities, including a popular summer camp aptly named Rosie's Girls for middle-school aged girls, and a one-day conference at Vermont Technical College, entitled Women Can Do for high-school aged girls. This year, VWW began a credit-recovery program at the Center for Technology at Essex that offers an English credit, a math credit, and a physical education credit for participants. Female students enrolled in the program can try their hand at everything from welding to auto repair.

For more information about Vermont Works for Women, contact them at 802.655.8900, or visit them in their new home at 32 Malletts Bay Avenue, Winooski. The Web address is vtworksforwomen.org.