

Females finding a whole new gear

Despite still-existing perception as man's work, mechanic jobs a good fit for women that enjoy being hands-on

BY FRANCINE KNOWLES
Staff Reporter

Tiffany Smith wasn't thinking about being a trailblazer. She just wanted her car fixed.

But as one of the mere 1.8 percent of women working as auto mechanics and service technicians in the U.S. — a field that employs 863,000 people — the trailblazer label fits.

"I started out doing body work, painting cars," she said. "I just decided I wanted to go into the mechanic field after bad experiences from taking personal cars to auto shops to have them fixed and being overcharged or the car not being fixed properly, I decided I'll work on my own stuff."

The career choice didn't shock her family.

"It wasn't anything out of the ordinary for them 'cause I'm a do-it-yourself-type person," shared the Englewood resident. "I figure if you can read, you can do it yourself."

"I stated out working on my own personal vehicles."

Over the years, those included a Honda Acura, Pontiac Grand Prix, Ford Crown Victoria and Chevrolet Monte Carlo.

"I've worked on every car that I've ever owned, from the tires to the engine," said Smith, 32, and a member of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Union Local 701.

She enjoyed the work "and decided I may as well make money off it," she said.

After completing training at Universal Technical Institute and Lincoln Technical Institute, she navigated her way to a diesel mechanic job at Cummins NPower in LaGrange, where she works on diesel engines on trucks, buses and light commercial vehicles.

Lyon resident Mykalena Kopystynsky, 23, also works as a mechanic at the company.

"I've always loved doing hands-on stuff, taking things apart and putting them back together, and just seeing how they work,"

Kopystynsky said, adding that her mom encouraged her to pursue the field.

Her interest was sparked while in high school, where she took a heavy-diesel engine class. Out of a class of about 20, two were female and one dropped out, she said.

After graduating from high school, she received her training at Universal Technical Institute, where "women were far and few between," she added. "Some guys were a little bit distant. Others were really welcoming. I never really had a terrible experience."

Josette Dodakian, a mechanic at Pep Boys' Grand Avenue location in Chicago, concedes she was naturally driven to do the work.

"I was just good at it," she said. "Grow-

ing up, my grandfather was a mechanic. He taught my mom, and my mom taught me what she knew. It went from there pretty much. My friends I grew up with, they were all motor heads. They all had muscle cars and worked on cars. I've been around it my whole life."

Dodakian, 41, has a 20-year history in the field. Over the years she's worked at Jiffy Lube, where she was a general manager, and some other shops before arriving at Pep Boys, where she is a service writer and mechanic.

Her gender has elicited positive reaction from female customers.

"I get a lot of women that want me to work on their cars because I'm a woman," she said.

As for male customers, at times she has faced skepticism, until they realize the lady mechanic has skills.

"I've gotten some who wanted to talk to another service adviser that was male," she said. "When they find out I know what I'm talking about, they felt more comfortable. So after a negative reaction from the start, by the time I get done talking with them, it turned into a positive reaction."

It's a job where, depending on training and certifications, pay can



Josette Dodakian, a mechanic with Pep Boys, has worked as a mechanic for 20 years. "I get a lot of women that want me to work on their cars because I'm a woman," she says. | BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES

range from about \$10 an hour to near \$30 an hour, according to the Labor Department.

Perceptions keep more women from considering the field, said Julie Mueller, president of Universal Technical Institute's Lisle campus.

"There's still a perception challenge out there with parents and counselors who honestly just

haven't taken a look" at the trade and are unaware of how it has evolved, Mueller said.

"Years ago it was very physical. ... Nowadays it's more mental, dependent on electronics, computer circuitry. You have to think through, diagnose. It's software-controlled. You can't just lift up a hood and see what's broken."

But Thomas notes the work still can be strenuous.

"I work on diesel engines," she said. "Those parts can be from 50 to 100 pounds. Just the constant lifting and twisting; sometimes you need to use a hoist. It can weigh on your body."

It's a job "you have to want to do, not just say I'm going to do this because the pay is good," she stressed. "You have to enjoy doing

it. I like to take things apart, see how they operate, how the inside looks, how to put it back together. I've always been an inquisitive-minded person, so this is the perfect type of job for me."

It's important to get more exposure to girls and young women to educate them about opportunities, Mueller said.

"This is an industry with expected job growth, continued demand and opportunity for people to grow and succeed," she said. "There are more vehicles on the road now, and people are keeping their cars longer. There is great demand from our employers, and these are jobs that can't be shipped overseas."

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