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Carpenter

ELAINE CANFIELD

Elaine Canfield's steel-toed work boots by the front door were in sharp contrast to the art prints and classical music that set the tone of her apartment.

As a girl I loved making Christmas ornaments and dyeing Easter eggs, all crafts I guess. I really enjoyed working with my hands. I had fantasies of some type of small cottage industry, not really a big career woman, but having meaningful work with a husband who was the breadwinner. As I got older I played the flute, mostly jazz. That suited my parents fine. They never steered me in the direction of a profession. They sort of hoped I would have a traditional marriage and be the woman behind the great man. As such, they never got around to telling me that one day, when I got out of school, I was gonna have to support myself. And somehow I never got around to thinking about that while I was in college, where I studied archeology, English, and anthropology. I didn't want to be forced into taking a lot of prerequisites, so I designed my own college major and took only the classes I wanted to take.

When I graduated from college in seventy-five, I got a part-time secretarial job at Bard College. Since I didn't like secretarial work, I started looking into the possibilities of repairing woodwind instruments. A professor in school had told me that I was good in music and good with my hands, so I should look into this. I took a short, four-week course at one of the colleges and discovered I liked doing mechanical work and set up an

apprenticeship with a man in Kingston, New York. I would take the clarinets home and work on them, and then once a week bring them back to his repair shop. I was paid ten dollars a clarinet for doing what we call an overhaul, which is when you replace the pads, joints, and springs. I didn't make more than eighty dollars a week at the most. But I was living with a man at that time who supported me, so there wasn't much pressure for money.

Then in the summer of seventy-seven I came out to Seattle and tried to continue my apprenticeship out here. I couldn't find anything and ended up doing secretarial work at the University of Washington. I hated my work and started looking for something else. I didn't start thinking about non-traditional work until I heard the carpenters were looking for women. I didn't know anything about carpentry. Didn't know how to use a hammer, how to use a saw, nothing. But as soon as the possibility was mentioned, my imagination went with it. I could have pursued another type of trade, like electrical, but to me carpentry is the most creative, most applicable to your daily life. Plumbing and electrical work have limitations. There's only so much you can do. It's valuable, it's neat, but it doesn't get a house built. And I liked the idea of working with wood. There's also a lot of independence in a trade. You work from job to job, not necessarily full time. Of course, the money is excellent. That definitely was there, a carrot in front of my nose. Besides I was all gung-ho, into being a torchbearer for women's rights. I wanted to get right out in front. That lasted until I realized there was a lot of danger in being a carpenter and had to deal with that on a day-to-day basis. A lot of tradespeople, when they start talking about the rate of fatal accidents, will say you take just as many chances driving to and from work each day. But they don't tell you that you're exposed to that danger level eight hours a day as opposed to an hour a day commuting. I still worry about fatal injuries and try to choose jobs where it's not high work and

work for companies with good reputations for safety. I also worry about losing an arm or a hand or having something explode in my face, losing my eyesight.

I was lucky to get accepted into a CETA program run in conjunction with Local 131 of the Carpenters Union. In the six-week program they taught us to use the basic tools—hammer, handsaw, tri-square, crowbars, and skillsaw. I was amazed at how much there was to be learned just at carpentry. I had always been told that carpenters were people that worked with their hands. They did that because they did not have the intelligence to do white-collar-type work. And when I ventured into carpentry, it just blew me away—just what is involved. The mechanics, the math—really, it's pretty intellectual-type work. You're always having to visualize what you're going to be building. You have to know how you're going to connect things, why you're cutting wood in certain dimensions, mechanics, leverage, how things work for you, and how to do it the fastest way possible. That's an awful lot to know at one time.

The other really good thing about the course was they taught you just how to go about surviving in the trade. They said to go out and look for your own work and not wait for the union to call. They never do. This is how you go look for jobs. This is how you dress. Wear your work clothes. Look ready for work and always have your tools in your car. Try to engage the foreman in a conversation, don't just take no for an answer. Tell the foreman you're in the union and ask if he's hiring. And on the two or three jobs where they tell you to come back, you keep coming back, and eventually they'll hire you.

Even after the CETA training program, I still had a very romantic image of what carpenters do—sort of interior, fine woodworking. Even the concrete form work was more small-scale (in my mind) than what it was actually about. And on my first job, I didn't even use a hammer for about a month and a half. I was on a steel form crew where you cut and strip concrete

forms, leaving an instant column. Once it's disassembled the crane picks it up and puts it on the ground, and you have an electrical impact wrench and go around tightening nuts and bolts. I did that for a month and a half. Didn't even really get a chance to use my head. That blew me away. I thought, "God, this is carpentry? Where's the wood? Where's the nails?" And I found out that's quite often what commercial construction is about. You're a mechanic doing what's most efficient for things to work. I was disappointed in a sense, because I couldn't see myself doing that for the rest of my life. But the other carpenters assured me there would be other phases to the building. The disappointment was offset by the newness of the job. Being a carpenter, being outside, big machinery, cranes, a lot of stuff going on all at once.

I've never worked on a big building downtown. Usually I work in a big pit that's probably a quarter of a city block long and twenty to thirty feet below street level. It's the foundations of buildings, so you're working in a sub-ground area with a lot of dirt which turns into a lot of mud when it rains. On other jobs, like the Port of Seattle, I've done remodeling. The building had been gutted out and we were building new walls. But new construction or remodeling, my working conditions are always dirty and exposed to the elements. If it's snowing and thirty degrees out, you work outside. If the wind is blowing forty miles an hour, you work outside. Really, the elements are the hardest thing to contend with. But there are other times when it is the best thing going. On a beautiful day, I look at other people in their offices, their factories, and wouldn't trade with them for the world.

As a first-year apprentice, you're pretty much a "gofer." You get the tools needed to do the job. You get out the skillsaws, plug things in, set up the work areas, get the sawhorses, just assist them the best you can. You pick up the mechanical know-how while doing other things, and by the time you're a third-year

you've got quite a lot of responsibility. There's always a journeyman telling you what to do and how to do it, but you do it yourself. And by the time you're fourth-year you're pretty much doing what the journeymen are doing, but you don't make the final decision. I'm a fourth-year now and do a lot of the form work and work on my own. I pretty much function on the journey level, but I still have the freedom to ask questions if I need to get advice. Most journeymen carpenters will fake it through somehow, but I still ask questions. I want to continue doing that, because there's so much of what I call "herd" mentality—sheep in a herd, everyone just follows without question. There's not very good communication in the trade. People are not explicit. They don't verbalize things. They just grunt. You're supposed to fake your way through it, get the job done with as little problem as possible. I'm not that kind of worker.

For a woman to survive in the trades, you really have to know how to psych out men, know what's behind their thinking, why they react, why they're prejudiced, be somewhat sympathetic, yet stand your own ground. You have to be tactful, not be hostile, not alienate people. You really have to learn professional survival skills, because men's masculinity is threatened by you being there. Society recognizes construction workers as being very macho and virile. When a woman comes along who's five foot three and a hundred and twenty pounds and can get in there and do their type of work, it's a blow to their ego, a real shock. So the men are threatened by it.

The men show that in different ways. If a foreman comes up to a group, he'll look at everyone except you. He'll delegate jobs to everyone but you, and then you have to go up and ask him. It's sort of uncomfortable things like that. Or the carpenters will pair up and you're the one left out. Or men you're working with just won't talk to you. I used to not push in those situations, but lately I've felt more self-confident, and sometimes I play games with those people. Like, for example, today on the job site there

is another fourth-year apprentice who is sort of the foreman's pet. He just came over and picked up some wood and started doing some form work on top of the footing another carpenter and I had built. And I yelled at him, "What's going on?" Not in a hostile way, just curious. We'd finished that footing, and I wanted to know what changes had been ordered. He wouldn't answer, so I got a bit flustered and asked again. He still wouldn't answer. I kept probing, and he kept not answering. Finally I said, "I'm talking to you. I want a response." I was just very aggressive, which I'd never been before. But I've gotten to the point where I'm tired of not getting recognition. Finally he answered me and explained there was a change in plans, not any mistake. I could see he was a little taken aback and I felt so good. I had won something. What was more interesting was the reaction of the other man. Right in the middle of all this he looked up at me and smiled.

The crew I'm working with now—it's never been better. I'm accepted. They kid me like one of the guys. They pay me compliments. They treat me like an equal. It has been a real breakthrough. I've had other crews that have been really nice, but I know enough now so that I can talk business as well as pleasure. Not only am I compatible, but I feel they recognize me as a fairly good carpenter. I haven't had that recognition before. Like if a carpenter I've been working with is talking with another man about something we built, he'll mention my name, say, "Elaine and I were working on this . . ." Even a week ago working with someone I wouldn't have gotten that recognition. So they include me, acknowledge me.

Last year I had a difficult time with both the crews I worked on. In one case I worked on a big job site—probably a crew of twelve men—and three of the men were under thirty. It's been my experience with that age group that they are very threatened by a woman doing a man's job. They're just virility and ego and macho and they can't handle it. They gave me a lot of bullshit

like, "Here's a mistake. Elaine must have done it." Anything to piss me off. Or they'd make dirty jokes about women. Or the typical things like sighing, burping, farting, and looking to see if they'd gotten a reaction from me. Or if I wouldn't play that game, they'd try to make me look foolish in front of the foreman.

After that, I worked for a small company that had never had a woman before. It went okay for the first three months because one journeyman thought I was very smart. We worked together, ate lunch alone, and had a lot of fun. The rest of the crew ignored us. But when the journeyman left, it was clear I was on my own. The men never talked with me, and laid me off in an uncomfortable way when I couldn't do high work. That left me pretty depressed, wondering if carpentry was gonna turn out to be increasing hostility, alienation, and resentment. I took a few months off in the summer and this year has worked out real well. Now I can see that I happened to hit two bad jobs last year. Not necessarily would I have to deal with that all the time.

Off the job, people in general are threatened by the type of work I do. Even the women I meet for the first time just cannot put the picture together. They just sort of stand back and say, "Oh, isn't that nice." Then they change the conversation really fast. They can't relate to you. They don't know where to begin. They may be threatened. I'm not sure. So in a social sense, you usually just get the silent treatment. They don't want to ask you too much more. They usually let it go at that.

I belong to a group called Women in the Trades and the reason I belong is because I need their support. I need that sympathy, that understanding, and to share the feelings of accomplishment. But mostly the support.