

Women Discover Career Choices in Welding



AWS President Victor Matthews is shown with SkillsUSA competition welders (from left) Sally Rudin, Samantha Riley, and Ashley Webel.

A new era of Rosie the Riveters is emerging as the shortage of welders worsens and crumbling infrastructures increase the need for women in the workforce

BY ELEANOR SHELTON

Ashley Webel, Samantha Riley, and Sally Rudin are three Washtenaw Community College (WCC), Ann Arbor, Mich., students who have set their goals on establishing profitable careers in various welding fields.

To perfect their manual skills, they get together each week to practice as a team for a welding skills competition. For the first time in history, an all-woman welding and fabrication team competed for a SkillsUSA national title. They have learned that it's important that they coordinate with each other, to know exactly what each one's role is, and plan ahead for the next move.

No Pain, No Gain

The women practiced welding 25 to 30 hours a week, coordinating their skills into a well-organized team. Practicing welding forces us to make some social sacrifices, Riley admitted. "We watch our friends going away and having fun for the weekends, but it's worth it."

Webel said that she eventually wants to do construction work on buildings and bridges. Riley's ambition is to become a welding instructor. Rudin is already involved in the industrial field working for a company that makes custom filters and strainers.

Their welding coach and trainer is Jacob (Jake) Holland, a welding instructor in the WCC Welding & Fabrication Dept. He doesn't treat them any differently than the male students who are preparing for a welding competition.

"As their welding coach," Holland said prior to the competition, "I put as much pressure on them as I can. I don't give them an inch, so when they compete at the nationals the pressure will be something they are used to."

The Competition Results

The WCC welding and fabrication

team was up against 13 other colleges from around the country. All were given the task of creating a rolling tool cabinet in just 6½ hours. There were a lot of considerations such as figuring out what works and what doesn't, how everyone can work efficiently as a team, and of course, observing safety precautions.

"We knew that this competition was going to be hard but it could change our lives," said Webel.

They took the silver medal, coming in behind American River College by just 20 points.

Coach Holland said, "These women are fantastic welders and now they have infinite career possibilities in front of them."

Women in Welding

Ilan Brat, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, said there will always be a need for good welders because welding is not a job that is easy to automate and the nation's infrastructure is aging. Stressing the serious shortage of welders in the workforce, Brat wrote that currently the average age of welders is 54 years old and a wave of welder retirements is looming. Companies are having to use perks, like signing-on bonuses and guaranteed overtime, to attract welders into their employ.

Welders are earning \$60,000 to \$100,000 working for industries like the oil sands in Alberta, Canada. It is now more important than ever to attract workers entering the workforce into the welding industry.

Perhaps now is time for more women to consider becoming welders and train for these attractive and financially rewarding careers in this industry. You may recall the era of Rosie the Riveter—when women performed men's jobs in manufacturing during World War II because the men were away serving in the armed forces. Now, according to the American Welding Society, currently a full 6% of the welding workforce is female.

Women Have an Edge in Welding

Jessi Combs, a welder and host of the program "Xtreme 4X4" on Spike TV, said women make great welders because of their patience, rhythm, and attention to details. "Employers tell me some of their best welders are women. There should be no fear for women getting into welding," said Combs in her video, *Hot Bikes, Fast Cars, Cool Careers*.

Karen Gilgenbach has an engineering

mechanics degree from Michigan State University but never wanted to sit behind a desk in a cubicle. When she interviewed for jobs she was most impressed by companies that offered a lot of variety and hands-on work. She is currently the Radnor product manager/regional manager of automation for Airgas North Central.

"The first time I took a welding class it scared me," admitted Gilgenbach. "But soon I began to enjoy it and now I love it. There is something about the art and focus of it that I like. Maintaining the arc, the sounds, the smells; everything else is drowned out."

Why Welding's a Good Career

One of the reasons that Gilgenbach thinks welding is a good career choice for women is there are benchmarks, such as certifications, that make the profession an even playing field. Gilgenbach has earned an AWS Certified Welding Inspector (CWI) designation. Also, her acceptance by her male coworkers has been overwhelmingly positive. Everyone has treated her professionally throughout her six years in the industry.

Coley McLean has served as a full-time welding instructor in the Welding & Fabrication Dept. at Washtenaw Community College for the last three years. She discovered her talent for welding through creating metal sculptures, and she still actively pursues her art when she's not teaching or fabricating commissioned projects.

"Welding has allowed me to pursue production, custom work, and teaching, which I love," said McLean. "Getting a diverse background and having crossover skills is important in today's economy."

Market Is Loosening up for Women

"I was rejected for the first two jobs I interviewed for because I was a woman," recalled McLean. "It wasn't my skill level, they were afraid that I physically wouldn't be able to do the job. I don't think that happens much anymore."

McLean agrees with Combs that women bring something special to welding. "I think that women have better hand-eye coordination, and can maintain a steady work flow."

Over the years, she has seen employers showing more favorable attitudes toward hiring women and women's increased opportunities for filling rewarding jobs in the welding industry. ♦



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