

'Being one of one' isn't a good feeling? International Women's Day highlights women in 'non-traditional' careers



Seeing herself as 'one of one' wasn't the feeling Nicole Boreland anticipated when she decided to change careers after 20 years in childcare, but, as far as feelings go, it wasn't unfamiliar.

She had gotten used to being the only Black woman in the room, sometimes the only woman in the room full stop, but was always willing to speak up and advocate for herself. But making that jump to a career in construction exposed a new facet to that feeling.

'Being a woman in construction can unlock a new level of loneliness when you don't see a version of yourself on site,' said Boreland on Thursday night at an event celebrating International Women's Day, one which put women in the trades and 'non-traditional' jobs in the spotlight.

Hosted by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Leah Taylor Roy at the LiUNA Local 506 Training Centre in Richmond Hill, it was attended by representatives from across the Greater Toronto Area, including York and Peel Regions, Federal Minister for Women and Gender Equality & Youth Marci Ien, and Federal Minister of Labour and Seniors Seamus O'Regan.

Last week's gathering underscored this year's International Women's Day theme of 'Invest in Women, Celebrate Progress.'

'To honour this theme, we're focusing on the importance of women in labour and non-traditional careers across all sectors and the need to ensure equal opportunities for women,' said Taylor Roy in welcoming remarks. 'We continue to break barriers every day, but I think some people sit back and think we're really there and we don't have to do anymore. I think some younger people still think that. Really, we still have a ways to go.'

'We can't sit back and say we're there because some of us have been able to make it; and some of us can say, 'There's a woman who did it, therefore we're good. Everyone can do it.' It's not the case. Until we have true equality, there is work to do.'

The women who shared their experiences at last week's event drew a line under that sentiment. Representing careers as varied as policing, firefighting and in construction, each broke through a glass ceiling and remain willing to help others up and through.

On her first day at a construction site, Boreland said she was 'overwhelmed by the stares, the very personal questions' she received from her male counterparts. They were 'shocked' to see her, she recalled, and was initially only assigned tasks tailored to their own

perceptions of what women could do.

'I am almost certain I was the subject of a 'toolbox talk' minutes before I arrived on that site,' she said. 'Luckily, with the support of LiUNA (Laborers' International Union of North America) 506, we (women) were able to build a community of mentorship and a safe space to support each other. Along with the knowledge I obtained here at this training centre, I feel confident and prepared to be a woman in construction. I wasn't deterred by my first experience. In fact, it fuelled me. It encouraged me to show up every day ready to work, to speak up more about the skills and the [training] I have obtained and ask for help when needed.'

'Within a few months, I was able to work on another site where my voice was heard, I wasn't isolated from my team, the bathrooms weren't tucked away in a dark or secluded corner and I was given the opportunity show what I was capable of ' and also getting the chance to learn something new. Women in the trades are not only the future, we are embedded in the present.'

Also highlighting the power of women in the trades was Construct, a social enterprise of Blue Door Shelters, serving York, Peel, Durham, and beyond. Construct provides training and on-the-job work experience and supports to vulnerable individuals looking to secure long-term well-paying careers in trades related to construction.

Construct's Emma Wood said, since its founding in 2020, the enterprise has trained over 500 people, with 85 per cent securing employment within six months of completing the program.

'The way our training works is a bit different across Regions,' she explained, noting that the program includes 'all the things you need to get into employment,' including relevant certificates, equipment like hard hats and steel-toed boots, job interview training and more.

'They are things that might seem just normal to us, but not everyone has had the opportunity to work,' she said. 'What makes Construct unique is its holistic approach to training with an emphasis on participants' wellbeing. We recognize that is not possible for vulnerable folks to take eight weeks off? so we pay our participants for their time in the program; wraparound supports provided to further remove the barriers and allow for participants to enter and finish the program. This includes food, transportation, psychotherapy, child care, emergency assistance for the things that just pop up. If you want go into apprenticeship, we'll cover your CVs. The best part, at the end there is a completion bonus so you can celebrate your achievements.'

'There is a need to tap into an untouched demographic of individuals to curtail rapid skills training and enter into the workforce to close this gap and there is no reason why these people can't be women. I might be biased, but I know women can be just as physically fit, determined, confident and capable of operating the same tools and machinery as their male counterparts and in a traditionally male-dominated industry, Construct is seeking not only to help meet the ongoing demand for skilled workers in the GTA, but to recruit women into participating in the program to jump-start their careers in the skilled trades.'

Women being just as 'physically fit, determined, and capable' was not lost on Amber Bowman, an active Captain with the Central York Fire Services (CYFS), a department serving Aurora and Newmarket.

Previously a high-performance athlete, particularly in hockey, Bowman was one of the first four women hired by the CYFS as late as 2011.

'I was about to sign my Division 1 full hockey scholarship with the Ohio State Buckeyes,' she said. 'After practice one day, I had a conversation with a male firefighter who is the dad to one of my teammates. He told my mother and I there was, 'no way I could tell your daughter to choose firefighting as a profession because of how dangerous it is, of what you see when responding to calls and the physical challenges the job entails.' But, being a high-ended athlete, I loved the profession of firefighting for the aspects of teamwork, community, dedication and the commitment to helping others and I was determined to prove him wrong.'

'My biggest goal now is to lead and support my little people to conquer their dreams,' she said of balancing her work with motherhood. 'My hope is some of their barriers that I was a part of breaking down no longer exist for the future of our youth.'

A similar view was expressed by York Regional Police Inspector Sarah Riddell, a fellow mom, who said this year's International Women's Day theme was a 'call to action and a reminder that gender equality is one of the most effective ways to build healthier, more prosperous and more inclusive communities.'

'I was born in 1973. Wonder Woman was a real thing and I wanted to be just like her,' she said. 'As the oldest child of a single parent family, I was responsible for the safety of my little brother. This was a job I was happy to take on and diligently kept little Mikey safe - whether he liked it or not. (And those of us in the room of a certain vintage will get the 'Mikey likes it' joke!) Those early days shaped a personal values system that is based on loyalty, bravery, courage and responsibility.'

'Through these 25 years I have been blessed with an amazing career. The Chamberlain Curse, 'May you live in interesting times,' is not so much a curse for our first responder as it is a promise.'

Those interesting times, she said, included 'days without sleep, split-second decision-making that affected people's life' and welcoming her first daughter in 2003, another in 2009, and then, in 2013, becoming the primary caregiver for her children while working as a detective in Markham.

There was, she said, 'a very real fear of not being able to manage at all, but I did. We do. Women do, and the same way my mom did.'

'If you find your north star and keep it in sight, the decisions you make will always be sound,' she included. 'They may not be easy, they seldom are, but you will know in your heart you did the right thing. I started in 1999 full of passion and ready to defend those who couldn't defend themselves and speak to those who could not speak for themselves. 25 years later, I am so fortunate to be able to support those who do the work on the frontline, making sure they are well, that they have what they need in order to do that important work of community safety and wellbeing.'

By Brock Weir
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