

Rosie's Riveting Legacy

Americans love the image of Rosie the Riveter. For many she is a nostalgic symbol of the WWII era. An 80-year-old icon of the 'can-do' spirit of a country at war. In reality, 'Rosie' is alive and riveting, hammering, hauling, installing and wiring away in the Midwest, and across North America.



During the early 1940s, when the U.S. entered WWII, the country's female labor force grew by 50 percent, according to a Metro State University report. By 1945, there were 19,170,000 women in the U.S. labor force, with nearly one out of every four married women working outside the home.

Of course, not all of these women were union 'Rosies'. But those who were – like [Boilermaker Betty Reid Soskin](#) – cracked open the door to future generations of North American women in the skilled trades. Since then, the ranks of women in trades have risen slowly but steadily enough that initiatives like Heartland Women in Trades (HWIT), Oregon Tradeswomen and Trailblazers, Inc. formed to nurture that growth.



Alise Martiny – Secretary-Business Manager of Greater Kansas City BCTC/ 1st President of HWIT

When Alise Martiny, Secretary-Business Manager of Greater Kansas City Building and Construction Trades Council and first President of HWIT, joined the Kansas City Cement Masons' Apprenticeship program in 1980, she was one of only two women in her class.

Twenty-five years later, Master Pipefitter and current President of HWIT, Quiema Spencer, had four other women in her Pipefitter Apprenticeship program. One was her colleague Serene Thomas, who went

on to become an instructor in the Pipefitter Training Center and serve on the Pipefitters' Finance Board.

2020 U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics show that while union membership among men decreased by 368,000, the number of women joining unions increased to 10.5 percent of total membership.

Although clearly still in the minority ([NPR: Women Underrepresented in the Trades](#)), there are now nearly seven million union women in the U.S.

In Canada, union membership among women is even higher. Women currently account for 53% of membership and Canada Labour Force trends indicate female membership in Canadian unions will reach 60% in the next 10 years.

Kevin Gard, Business Manager with Cement Masons 518, has noticed an uptick in membership among women. "We've seen a big shift from 25 years ago," said Gard. "These days, many of our region's most promising future leaders are women."

Labor Local 264 just named its first woman, Lacresha Kuykendall, to its Executive Board, according to the Local's Business Manager, Reggie Thomas.

Paula Winkler, one of the founders of HWIT and a colleague of Kuykendall and Thomas, began her apprenticeship with Labor Local 264 in 2002. She was raising a child with special needs so she was looking for a steady, living wage after working as a bartender and school bus driver.

"Early on," Winkler said, "I experienced skepticism

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from a few men on job sites, but I focused on learning new skills and getting the job done, no matter how demanding the project was." With nearly 20 years now under her belt, she hopes her hard work helps show young women that they can do anything when they set their mind to it.

Lindsey Heath, an Apprentice Bricklayer with Local 15, is part of the younger generation entering the skilled trades. When she was furloughed from her restaurant job in 2019, her father, a union drywaller, urged her to check out the wages and opportunities in the skilled trades. She applied to several apprenticeships before entering the Bricklayers' program in 2020. Heath recently posted a [TikTok video](#) about her apprenticeship that went viral.

Don Hunt, Business Manager with Bricklayers Local 15, noted that the numbers of women entering the bricklaying program are still small. "But," Hunt said, "women who do join our ranks work incredibly hard and have a great attitude."

For many young women, a trade apprenticeship program is not even on their radar when they are beginning to plan their futures.

Sam Weber, who had been trying to make ends meet by working late hours as a bartender, had not given much thought to becoming a Pipefitters' apprentice until she attended an HVAC program at Maple Woods. She knew little about unions while growing up but, when she heard about the benefits and job security available to Pipefitters, she applied for an apprenticeship and was accepted last year.

Weber has also benefitted from the KCI Workforce Training program, which has allowed her to work on the job while helping to build the new Kansas City airport. Heath has been working on the new airport, as well, through her Local's apprenticeship program.

Thanks to apprentices like them, and the female colleagues who preceded them, Rosie's legacy will continue to thrive. As Thomas noted, "We're going to be seeing more and more women in union leadership positions."

Martiny, now a 40 year veteran and a leading voice in the Skilled Trades, agreed. "The more mentors we have who look like us, the more of us you'll see."



Heartland Women in Trades

One evening in 2017, a group of Midwestern tradeswomen attending a Labor conference met after hours for drinks and conversation. Before long that friendly conversation turned into a bold initiative. The group decided it was time to start a regional organization that provided community engagement, networking and empowerment for women currently in trades and that introduced young women to learning opportunities and a potential career path in skilled trades.

By the time the conference had wrapped up, Heartland Women in Trades (HWIT) had formed with nearly 40 members joining in the first year. They turned to Bank of Labor for help with their financial services.

"We are proud to provide banking services for HWIT," said Bank of Labor Business Development Officer, Matt Johnson. He added, "Their group is a great example of the impact union members can have on both local communities and the nationwide Labor movement."

"Two of our most impactful initiatives have been NAWIC Camp and several Habitat for Humanity builds," said current HWIT president, Quiema Spencer.

NAWIC is a free summer camp held in partnership with National Association of Women in Construction that offers high school age girls hands-on learning opportunities in basic carpentry, electrical, and welding. Camp activities also include a field trip, tool demonstrations and more.

Teams of HWIT members have also collaborated on several Habitat for Humanity home builds. Spencer said COVID-19 restrictions put the camp and Habitat projects on hold in 2020 but HWIT intends to resume these and other projects that align with the HWIT mission once pandemic restrictions and supply shortages ease.

<https://www.heartlandwomenintrades.org/>