

Erika Glenn-Byam

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“We’re here and we’re here to stay.”

Charting a path for women in the building and construction trades

Erika Glenn-Byam loves what she does. She is a construction worker—a job held by less than three percent of women and less than seven percent of African Americans in the United States. She has worked on historic buildings, such as the Plaza Hotel and St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Any given day, the young trailblazer might be helping to demolish a building, working with bricklayers as a mason attendant or learning new skills as a general contractor. Glenn-Byam entered the trades with the support of Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), a nonprofit that has provided training to women who want to pursue a career in the construction, utility, and maintenance trades for nearly four decades. Several unions have agreed to accept the women who go through NEW’s program into multi-year apprenticeships. Glenn-Byam is one of the more than 1,000 women who have gone through the program and attained apprenticeships since 2005. All of them, including Glenn-Byam, can expect to earn between \$35-\$55 per hour plus benefits once they attain journeyman status.

Within Local 79, the native New Yorker practices organizing by mentoring other women who enter the trades and encouraging them to stay. More than half of the women who enter an apprenticeship program in the building trades never finish it. Those who do finish and succeed in their careers often have strong mentors, such as Glenn-Byam, to help them overcome the challenges of thriving in a nontraditional field for women. Glenn-Byam is also vice president of the union’s newly formed Women’s Committee, which hosts outreach events in neighborhoods that help build bonds between union and community members.



After graduating Bishop Loughlin High School in 1999, I went off to the Air Force. I did my tour, came home and just bounced from job to job for a while. Finally, I said to myself, “I need a career. I need something that I want to wake up and do every day—something that I’m going to love.”

Then I thought of NEW. I had tried to get in the program before but didn’t get picked. So I asked myself, “Hey, how many no’s before someone says yes?” I tried NEW again, and this time I was accepted into the program. From then on, I knew I wanted to be a laborer.

Now we have a Women’s Committee. We recently threw a party for kids at a homeless shelter in Brooklyn. We had a fantastic turnout. We were just looking to get involved with the communities and give back. That is our main goal . . .and to help push Local 79.

Our local has about 10,000 members, and I would guess that about 200 are women, and about a third of those are black women. A lot of them come talk to me about the trade. And I give them advice: Help the local, give back, attend your shops, attend meetings, go out and volunteer, rally with us, show your face. I tell them all the

“ I’m making the same amount of money as the next man.

NEW’s program is pretty interesting. They engage us in different activities to get a feel for each trade. One morning we might learn how to hook up an electrical box. Another morning we might be doing demolition, where you are carrying a 70-pound bucket. NEW works to give women a feel for the trades—to help you understand that there is heavy lifting and ways to handle yourself around the men. NEW is a great experience. It prepares you for this particular career and helps you make sure this is what you want to do.

In the trades, there are not many sisters working with me, but it is getting there. Now I am seeing a lot of sisters coming in from all nationalities. So, it makes me feel a little bit more comfortable. Hey, we’re here and we’re here to stay.

time, “It is not what we can do for you, it is what you can do for us. Just come out and network. It is always about networking.” That is what I tell the apprentices coming behind me.

We get together one-on-one and I talk to them on a really personal level. I tell them how I survived. And I let them know to never let anyone bring you out of character—even though it can be really challenging some days in the field. I’ve encountered ignorance. Sometimes racism. These are the major parts of what’s hard. And looking for a bathroom! We’re supposed to have female bathrooms. And water in the summertime. The rules are there for companies to follow. But it can be a challenge just getting these companies to enforce them.

The biggest issue is finding and keeping childcare. We even have single dads that are taking care of their kids. We're on call almost 24/7. That prohibits a lot of our members from seeking great or good jobs or staying on those jobs. So Local 79, in collaboration with Cornell University, sent out a survey to our members to see how big a problem this is. When the results come out, the union can implement changes. It is a small step, but we are moving forward.

There are positive things that happen in the field, too. You meet some remarkable individuals, some wonderful people. And you will form lifetime friendships with these people.

Organizing as women is important. It is about togetherness and unity and everybody being on the same page. I think that is what moves us. And everybody striving for the same cause. When you are solo, it is no good. Your voice will never be heard! You have to be together as one, a team.

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Less than **7%** of all African Americans
work in the construction trades

Source: "Employed Person By Detailed Occupation, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 15, 2015. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>.