



## Massachusetts Girls in Trades Conference-Springfield

On March 14, Lucy Rodriguez (left) from the Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical Academy in Springfield and Cherylann Skrocki (right) from Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School in Palmer were the student moderators during the welcome/opening plenary of the Massachusetts Girls in Trades Conference & Career Fair at Springfield Technical Community College.

More than 300 students from 16 Western Massachusetts schools participated in the Girls in Trades Conference. The recent Eastern Mass event hosted another 500!



# From the ground up: Springfield fair encourages girls to join the building trades

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SPRINGFIELD — When Sherri Casey and Briana Merkel walked onto the MGM Springfield project site two years ago, they were both nervous and excited to be there.

“We got to be a part of the project from the ground up,” said Merkel, a Putnam Vocational Technical Academy graduate who is now a member of Laborers’ Union Local 999.

“When you hear someone talking about MGM at the grocery store or a bank, you think, ‘I helped build that,’ and it’s a proud feeling,” said Casey, a Local 999 member who graduated from Springfield Central High School and served two tours in Iraq with the U.S. Army.

Both women were at the Massachusetts Girls in Trade event held at Springfield Technical Community College on Thursday to expose young women from across the state to building jobs.

“As the only technical community college in Massachusetts, this is mission central. We are excited to host the Girls in Trade event for a second year,” said STCC President John B. Cook.

He said the college offers programs in areas like construction and heating, ventilation and air conditioning, and it can serve as a gateway for many students to begin their careers after high school.

STCC’s Scibelli Hall was filled with teenage girls from various vocational technical schools who are interested in nontraditional career paths.

Alexa Ramirez, a sophomore at Putnam, said she is taking up carpentry.

“I would really like to be a vet, but I also love to build things ... so it was interesting to hear what the women in different trades had to say,” she said.

Casey and Merkel both shared their experiences with the girls of how they got into construction work.

“Having gone to a college prep school, that was always the path everyone was pushing on me. I tried it, but I ended up going into the military instead,” she said.

Casey served for six years before deciding that making a living getting shot at every day was not what she wanted to do anymore.

“Now I still get to do a job where I am physically active, a job that’s challenging,” she said. “Every day you can learn new skills and do new things.”

Merkel enjoys driving large forklifts and seeing projects completed that she worked on.

“It can be intimidating at first, like with any job, but when you have the training necessary and the skills to do it you feel more confident going into that environment,” she said.

Ray Johnson, an apprenticeship coordinator, said he has been in the business for more than 25 years and has seen an increase in women taking on construction jobs.

“Right now 25 percent of our apprentices are women,” he said.

To be an apprentice, a woman has to be at least 18 years old, have a valid driver’s license, a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate, and pass a drug test.

“The program is two years and apprentices need to have 300 hours of classroom experience and 4,000 hours of on-the-job training,” he said.

Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Rosalin Acosta and Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno attended the event and encouraged students to consider alternative job opportunities.

“Think about the construction industry in Massachusetts. It’s rapidly growing because our economy is growing,” she said.

Compared with other trades, she said, construction has the greatest proportion of women, but it is still only 5 percent. “So we have great opportunities and so much more work to do,” Polito said.

She told the girls to think about what they like, what their skills are and what that could lead to.

“These career paths can take you to a place where you can earn more,” she said. “We talk about equal pay for equal work, and of course that’s a no-brainer. But I want women to engage in careers and jobs that pay more, and I think if you continue down this path of exploration it will lead you to a job that will bring economic security and opportunity to your life as well as an enriching and satisfying career.”



