



Women helping women

By Sally Pollak

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WINOOSKI -- Hard hats and work boots are not the typical outfit for high school girls, but Kristin Ducharme and Sarah Chapman aren't typical students.

The Jericho teenagers are students at the Center for Technology, Essex, where they are enrolled in the building program. Of the 34 students in the program, Ducharme and Chapman are the only girls.

Last week, as part of the tech center's co-op program, the girls were on a job site in Winooski, working with a construction crew from J.A. Morrissey, a general contracting firm owned and run by Jeanne A. Morrissey.

The workers are building a new office for Vermont Works for Women (VWW), a nonprofit that, through a variety of employment, training and education programs, helps women achieve a livable wage through nontraditional work.

"I'm learning how the team actually operates," said Chapman, 16. "Everybody does their own thing, but they all work together at the same time."

The high school students were assigned to the Winooski construction project because of the educational opportunity it would offer, said Cari Papp, the center's career development coordinator. In addition, the learning would take place in an environment that supports and encourages young women working in a nontraditional field, she said.

"We are lucky if we get one girl per year in the build program; two females is excellent for us," Papp said. "The more nontraditional students that we get into the various programs -- whether boys in the cosmetology program or girls in building or automotive -- we're hoping they spread the word to their friends."

The Winooski assignment placed the teens at a job site where they were surrounded by women who had established themselves in a mostly male profession.

"I think it's great to have the girls here," project manager Annie Goff said. "It's fantastic at that age to have a job experience that is typically nontraditional for women."

Apart from a female general contractor, the Winooski construction project features a female architect, project manager and carpenter. The client, VWW, embodies the efforts and goals of the students' high school program.

VWW's new office, designed by architect Ann Vivian, calls for the building's mechanical systems to be exposed. In this way -- with the sprinkler, the wiring and other systems visible -- the building itself is a learning space for women enrolled in VWW programs.

The girls helped put up blocking between studs, working with carpenter Amy Judd. She learned her trade in 1999 through a VWW program, discovering at age 30 her professional interest.

Judd advised the girls to have the confidence to ask questions. Judd uses that advice herself and doesn't hesitate to ask for help lifting heavy equipment.

"It's important to have the confidence to make a lot of mistakes and to remember that no one is born with these skills, regardless of gender," Judd said. "You have to learn. There will be stereotypes on any job site. However, I think it's really important to ask for help if you need it."

Working with role models like Judd is a significant part of VWW's mission, said Tiffany Bluemle, the organization's executive director.

"It's important to have visible role models who can encourage you and set your sites beyond what you might have thought possible," Bluemle said. "We help women and girls recognize that there's a big world out there, and we try to help them achieve their potential, whatever it is."

Morrissey, who earned her engineering degree at the University of Vermont in 1981, founded her company in 1993. The past five years, J.A. Morrissey has averaged \$10 million to \$15 million a year in business, she said.

During her career, Morrissey has seen a decline in the number of obstacles facing women and a greater sense of opportunity for them, she said.

"There's still work to be done," Morrissey said. "Fewer obstacles and the creation of more opportunities is in large part due to organizations like Vermont Works for Women."

The fact that J.A. Morrissey is building VWW's office speaks to Morrissey's support of the nonprofit's

efforts and mission.

"My interest in the job was most definitely to be able to participate in a meaningful way in helping them realize the next large step in what they do," she said.

For the students, a couple of lessons were taking hold -- both related to swinging a hammer in a Winooski winter.

"It's tiring," Ducharme said. "Your hand gets cramped up after a while."

"It's a good way to take out my frustrations," Chapman said.

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