



Breaking Tradition: Girls Succeed in Male-Dominated Careers

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(WCAX) - On a chilly morning in Randolph Center, 400 high school girls are rising above the norm and trying some new terrain.

At the 11th annual Woman Can Do! Conference girls get to try their gloved hands at male-dominated careers like chainsawing, auto body tech, carpentry, Internet engineering and welding.

Far from their male classmates the girls show no fear, from climbing a fire truck ladder in full fire garb to testing their skills with a chainsaw. But many of the participants say they wouldn't be as comfortable trying these new things if they were learning in a co-ed environment.

"If I wasn't so sure it would make me uncomfortable and not want to do it with all the boys," said Hartford H.S. junior Katelyn Lyman.

Tiffany Bluemle, executive director of Vermont Works for Women, says it's important for the girls to see what they're capable of because they don't usually see people who look like them doing what they're doing today.

"The electrician that comes to their house isn't a woman, the truck driver that's working on the highway project isn't a woman," Bluemle says.

That's because the majority of women are tracked into so-called "pink collar" jobs in the caring professions like child care and teaching. However, those fields typically pay less than the male-dominated ones, which is why 54 percent of the women living in poverty are single, without kids, yet they have full-time jobs.

"What this tells us is work isn't working for a lot of women," Bluemle says.

It certainly wasn't working for women like Demeny Pollitt. After years as a social worker she realized she was spending all her spare money fixing her car. So she went to an auto training program where she was one of only two women in the class.

"I think it's an unusual career for a woman and so people don't think about it, and when they do think about it they're not terribly encouraged to do it," Pollitt says.

Pollitt now owns Girlington Garage in South Burlington, but despite the female theme of her company's name, Pollitt says she's had difficulty finding female auto techs to join her business.

At the conference, participants say seeing these role models has opened their eyes to things they never thought they were capable of.

"It's really nice to know that women do show that they can be just like men," said Montpelier H.S. senior Kaiya Andrews.

Conference organizers look at the event as a day to open girls' minds by breaking old traditions and hopefully starting new ones.

"It's a little heavy for me but running the chainsaw you've got to have a lot of muscle and strength," Andrews said after cutting her first log with a chainsaw. "It does show we can do it!"



Vermont Works for Women

is a 501c3 nonprofit organization founded in 1987 to help women and girls recognize their potential and explore, pursue and excel in work that leads to economic independence.

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