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Constructive work

March 30, 2007

By Emily A. Seiffert Times Argus Staff

MONTPELIER – One year ago, Yolanda Slothower would never have imagined pursuing a career in construction.

On Thursday, the 29-old-year Washington woman joined five other Vermonters graduating from a unique program designed to help women pursue highway construction jobs.

Slothower, a mother of four, had been working as a bill collector when she heard about the program from a friend.

"It's something I'd never even thought about doing until the opportunity came up," she said. "It's been great."

Slothower hopes to work with Winterset Corp. at the Randolph bridge project this summer.

The highway construction field offers better-paying jobs and more opportunities for advancement than many of the fields women are typically employed in, but men comprise 92 percent of the highway construction workforce, according to Lori Valburn, civil rights and labor compliance chief of the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

The pilot program, Step Up to Highway Construction, was a partnership between the Transportation Agency and Vermont Works for Women, a nonprofit organization that offers training programs for women and summer camps for girls designed to help participants "pursue and excel in nontraditional careers that pay a livable wage," according to the group's mission statement.

Jayne Sheridan, deputy director of Vermont Works for Women, said the program was a win-win for all involved.

"It was an opportunity for the Vermont Agency of Transportation to get qualified, trained women to go into their on-the-job training program, an opportunity for contractors to get employees who come in with a knowledge base that brand-new employees often don't have, and it helped women enter a field where they could earn a livable wage and support themselves and their families," she said.



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Buffy Langlois of Randolph ties off rebar in a simulated concrete form during a Women at Work training session recently in Montpelier.

Photo: Stefan Hard/Times Argus

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Federal highway dollars covered the participants' tuition, but for nine weeks the women commuted to Montpelier – some from as far away as Derby and Bridport – and dedicated four full days each week to class work, physical conditioning and hands-on training in hopes of securing better-paying jobs to support their families.

Hope Bowen, 32, of Derby, a single mother of three who had worked in corrections and had done some flagging work for construction projects, said she learned of the program from the back of her unemployment check. Bowen hopes to land a better-paying job with the new training under her belt.

She said the biggest challenge was the morning fitness regimen. The women met at 8 o'clock each morning to work out with a personal trainer at First in Fitness in Berlin for nearly two hours before beginning the classroom and hands-on work, which lasted until 4:30 each afternoon.

Slothower loved the work-outs, but found herself challenged by the sheer amount of new information.

"You're hearing a lot about different areas of the industry and trying to take in a lot of information," she said. "It's a lot, but it's definitely been helpful."

Vermont Works for Women's Director of Programs Kristen Mullins explained that a wide range of classes introduced the participants to all aspects of the business, including heavy equipment, concrete and piping. These hard-hat classes were interspersed with daily sessions on softer skills, such as developing a job-search plan, making the cold call, goal setting, and getting along with co-workers.

"We hope that the women leave the program with a solid sense of what they want to do and the tools they need to get them where they want to go," said Mullins.

Each graduate has an individual story.

While most of the participants were not working during the nine weeks of training, Judy Booth, 48, of Bridport, worked in Shelburne doing live-in care every weeknight. Booth said she was challenged by the long hours, along with the physical training. She said the physical trainer, "really makes you push yourself, which is good, because you don't want to get out there and not be able to do the work."

Buffy Langlois, 25, of Randolph, had delivered a son by caesarean section just four months before the course began. Langlois, who had worked on a dairy farm, hopes to pair her highway construction training with a commercial driver's license.

Dorothy McGrath, 44, of Barnet, is a divorced mother of four children whose work history has included waiting tables, driving a limousine and working at a racetrack. McGrath said she appreciated that the course taught "a bit of everything, so we won't be surprised by anything."

The course met at the Northeast Regional Safety Academy building in Montpelier, a giant indoor playground for adults, complete with heavy equipment, a roadway, and a manhole cover leading to a network of tunnels. Many of the construction classes were taught by Dick Wobby, director of member services with Associated General Contractors, which owns the building.

"The participation by the contracting community has been phenomenal with this course," said Sue Hackney, On the Job training program manager with the transportation agency. "We've had project managers come in from Pike and from Winterset, from J.A. McDonald, and it's made a big difference to the women. Besides being instructors, they're great role

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models. They've been in the business and have given them a lot of tips on what to do, what not to do and what to expect when they go into the industry."

On Tuesday, one of the final days of class work, Dee Ward, 47, a foreman with J.A. McDonald Inc. of Lyndon trained the women in roadway piping. Ward was a divorced mother of five children in 1989 when she was the first person to complete the On the Job highway supervisory training program, a 2,000-hour course.

"I think it's wonderful that the program itself has evolved over the years. When I went through it was all on-site training," said Ward. The new program's graduates have a solid overview of the industry, which "gives them a large advantage so that they've got some direction when they go to seek employment out there."

Sarah Ashline, 21, of Barre, said the program helped her build up her self-confidence. "You get to meet awesome people and you have this huge support group. I grew up in the construction environment but I never went out and did all these things.

"I thought I had all these limitations, but I don't. If I just push a little harder I can go beyond that."



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