

The Washington Times

New tradeswomen set off to reconstruct lives

By Adrienne T. Washington
June 12, 2007

"Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime."

It may be a cliché, but the idea is critical to 10 area women who last week received certificates and new tools to rebuild their lives.

Sharan Mitchell, 42, is a standout among the first graduating class of the revived Washington Area Women in the Trades (WAWIT). The free construction-training program was developed to help low-income women start lucrative careers.

"I want other people who are out on the streets to know there is help for people like us, and people who really care," Ms. Mitchell said before Friday night's graduation ceremony at the YWCA National Capital Area, a major sponsor of the self-sufficiency project.

Today, thanks to Steve Beheler at Spokes Etc. Bicycles on North Quaker Lane in Alexandria, Ms. Mitchell also has new wheels for her pre-dawn commute. The company generously donated the majority of the cost of a brand-new robin's-egg blue mountain bike, valued at more than \$300, so she could continue on the path to a better future.

The lack of accessible and affordable transportation is a significant obstacle for many people in Washington who must report to work when a lot of us are hitting the snooze button, said Joan Kuriansky, executive director of **Wider Opportunities for Women**.

"This was not an easy process. ... At one point I thought I would have to drop out of the program because I don't have any family here,

and I didn't have any way to get [to the Y]," said Ms. Mitchell, who lives at the Guest House transitional home for women in Alexandria.

The early-morning buses wouldn't take her where she needed to go: the YWCA on Ninth Street Northwest. She had to be there by 6 a.m. to board a van to the Carpenter's Center in Upper Marlboro for hands-on classes that began at 7 a.m.

The native New Yorker is the only woman in the program who does not reside in the District. Her closest relative is a sister who is stationed in Germany.

Undaunted, Ms. Mitchell found a rusty, discarded 10-speed bike in the Guest House shed. She tried to repair the bike, perpetually stuck in fifth gear, with masking tape and wire. She also found an old dog chain and a small key lock to secure the bike in her "parking space."

For 12 weeks, Ms. Mitchell rose at 3:30 a.m., dressed, mounted the bike at 4:30 a.m. and rode to the nearest Metro station even in snow, rain and wind. For 12 weeks, she received no pay in exchange for the life-altering training.

"I wanted so much to learn a trade and get an apprenticeship," said Ms. Mitchell, who earlier worked odd jobs. "This is the first time in my life that I really know I have a passion and training for a career. I can make money and have a life for myself, and that's the best thing."

Ms. Mitchell's tenacity and determination inspired her classmates, who call her "Buster." "That woman was here every day and early," said Alice Drew, the program director.

The grateful Ms. Mitchell said everyone shared in her joy at graduation when she was presented with the mountain bike (which, to be upfront, I helped procure).

"We all started crying," said one of her housemates, looking at the new bicycle in the Guest House living room Sunday afternoon. The old one was leaning against the back deck, its kickstand broken.

WAWIT is a collaboration of the YWCA of the National Capital Area, the AFL-CIO's Carpenters and Sheet Metal Workers unions and **Wider Opportunities for Women**. The program includes skills training, math and basic adult education, and fitness classes to get the women's bodies in shape for the physically demanding jobs with starting salaries of more than \$16 an hour, plus benefits. The women also receive 18 months of individualized case-management services after job placement.

Free to the participants, the training costs \$10,000 to \$13,000 per person. The collaborators spent two years raising money to restart the trades program after it was in halted in 2000 because of a lack of funding.

Ms. Kuriansky noted that in nontraditional jobs such as construction, women can earn 30 percent more than in clerical and service jobs.

This WAWIT class did so well that the Carpenters union offered the students a second-year apprenticeship with pay, she said. However, Ms. Mitchell has had to decline one job assignment because, as you might guess, it is in a location that is inaccessible by public transportation.

"I'm not going to let that stop me," she said, after trying to determine whether she could reach the site using Metro and her new bike.

The straight-talking Ms. Mitchell is a dead ringer for poet Nikki Giovanni in petite stature as well as resonant voice. She minced no words taking full responsibility for a life that was "pretty complicated doing a lot of things that weren't positive."

Ms. Mitchell aims to become a journeywoman and maybe start a contracting business with some of her

classmates. "And I wouldn't discriminate against men," she joked. However, her most immediate goal is to find work and housing. "I just want to get a job and show what I can do," she said.

I have no doubt that she will.

For more information on the WAWIT program, contact Joy Nixon at jnixonwilson@ywcanca.org or call 202/626-0700, Ext. 39. The next class begins Monday.