

The Washington Post

Women Build Future With Trades Training; Graduates to Cash In on Building Boom

By Sabrina Valle
June 14, 2007

DeBre McCrea pushes her right sock down and shows the scars a bullet made on her leg in 1986. "My son was 10 years old when I went to prison," she said. "I was convicted for first-degree murder."

Five months after getting out of prison and just a month before her son turns 30, she is excited about her future.

"Now I can tell other women who don't know which way to go where I came from and where I am at today, because of this program," McCrea, 54, said a few minutes before her graduation in the first class of the Washington Area Women in the Trades. "It made a big difference in my life, a big change. It put me on the right track."

The program trains low-income women, many from troubled backgrounds, in the building trades so they can get union jobs in the growing construction industry. The ceremony for the first group of 10 graduates was Friday at the National Capital Area YWCA, 624 Ninth St. NW.

"This was a dream of different women, and my class has made it a reality," graduate CeTenia Howard said.

After 12 weeks of learning mainly blue-collar trades, such as carpentry and sheet-metal work, McCrea and her colleagues have been offered apprenticeships with a carpenters union.

"This training is very timely because we are in the middle of a huge building boom in D.C.," said Joan A. Kuriansky, executive director of **Wider Opportunities for Women**.

Wider Opportunities runs the training program with the YWCA and the Community

Services Agency of the Metropolitan Washington Council of the AFL-CIO.

"Between now and 2015, the government will be spending more than \$10, \$12 billion on construction [in the District], and we want to make sure that D.C. women residents are going to be a part of this group," Kuriansky said.

Sharan Mitchell learned about the program at a religious organization that treats addicted women in Alexandria, where she is living temporarily. She had to wake up at 3:45 a.m., take her rusted bike with taped seats and gears stuck on level five and ride to a Metro station to catch the first train to Washington.

"That bike got me through a lot of cold mornings, a lot of windy mornings and a lot raining mornings," Mitchell said with a proud smile.

Mitchell said she was dissatisfied with her "nonproductive life" and her bad friendships, and thus wanted to make sure she would be in time to catch the van that would take the group to the training site in Marlboro run by the carpenters union.

"It was really tough to change," Mitchell said. "I already wanted to, but I wondered when I was going to start it, because I didn't have money, no job, no real skills. . . . But now my life is back on track. I feel great about myself, and I think I am where I am supposed to be."

Mitchell and some of the other program graduates have appointments this week at Clark Construction Group and are hoping to get jobs in the construction of the baseball stadium in Southeast Washington.

The program costs \$6,000 to \$7,000 per person and includes 12 weeks of training and 18 months of case management to make sure participants have the assistance and psychological help they need to succeed in the blue-collar environment.

Program organizers estimate that within four to six months, the newly employed women will have earned income equal to the money spent on their training and, within five years, they will have contributed in taxes a sum equal to the cost of the training.

The nontraditional work programs for women run by **Wider Opportunities** and the YWCA closed more than five years ago when they lost their government funding. Now the organizations are rescuing the jobs training initiative, which began almost 40 years ago, by getting funds from a combination of small foundations in the Washington area and individual donors.

The next session begins Monday. All low-income women with a high school degree in the D.C. area are eligible.

Howard is making plans to start working as soon as possible and later going on to school to become a landscape architect.

"This is what I need to do, this is where I need to be. And from here, it's history," she said.

For information about the program, visit <http://www.ywcanca.org> or call 202-626-0700, Ext. 39.



Sharan Mitchell, from left, DeBre McCrea and CeTenia Howard, graduates of the Washington Area Women in the Trades, display the tools of their new trade. The program trained them for jobs in the construction industry.