

APPRENTICESHIP

A Word From an Apprentice

What does apprenticeship mean to you?

Chanel Waits

7th period carpenters apprentice, Local UBC 721

“Becoming a union carpenter was not only a continuation of my dad’s 43-year legacy in the trade, but also the open door I needed to finally discover what I believe I am meant to do.

The title of second-generation carpenter was not something I ever anticipated becoming. In fact, throughout my childhood, the medical field was the direction I had every intention of pursuing. It wasn’t until my emergency medicine career was brought to a humbling halt by failing my exit exam, that I was led to what I now consider my biggest passion of all, carpentry. And more specifically, equity within the trades.

I came face to face with failure during that time. It left me feeling directionless, hopeless and disappointed. But letting go of an expectation for what my life was supposed to look like actually propelled me into finally seeing the possibility of other careers. That “failure” brought me straight to a life full of fulfillment, passion and personal success.



Chanel straddles a 100 foot high beam to secure wooden blocks to a stringer.

The joy and accomplishment you feel by working with your hands is unmatched. It gives you a sense of pride, confidence, honor and overall triumph that for me, has yet to be met by anything else. But being in the industry of construction also has its hardships. It has not been an easy task, especially as a woman and there are days that I question my very existence within the trade and I’m sure many people feel the same way too, man or woman. It can be hard work physically, mentally and emotionally some days. But trust me when I tell you, that although it is not an easy path to choose, it is rewarding.

My true passion within this primarily male dominated world is to see women thrive alongside men. Using my presence and reputation on the job site to open doors for many other women and to someday feel like less of the minority. I want the men I work alongside to see and remember my ethic, abilities and drive, so the next woman that they encounter will be given a higher level of respect.

I want to see the construction industry flourish with equity, and I want other women to experience the benefits of a trade—the income, the pride, the accomplishment, the self-sufficiency and the sense of personal power that it brings. Being a part of a union apprenticeship has changed my life in more ways than I could ever express. It gave me a hope when I had nothing to hope for and turned my whole life around.

Someday I'd like to return the favor by becoming an instructor and train the new generation of apprentices. To instill the same excitement and joy of the craft that was instilled in me. To honor those courageous women before me who forged the way and to continue what they started.

Being a union carpenter is so much bigger than carrying out a legacy, building a structure or having the title. Being a union carpenter is collectively having a hand in making history and creating a brighter tomorrow for generations to come. It's the hardest thing I have ever had to do, but it is the best thing I ever became a part of and I am proud to be a union carpenter."