

CHANGING THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY, ONE WOMAN AT A TIME



‘Just watch me.’ That’s how Nicole Ross responded when told she can’t be an apprentice carpenter because she’s a girl.

You don’t tell a young woman who has completed two Iron Man Triathlons, bicycled across Canada, has a black belt in karate and was about to earn a master’s degree in chemistry that she can’t do something.

This past winter, Ross was the top student among the 100 apprentice carpenters graduating to journeymen status from the Carpenters’ Local 27 Training Centre in North York.

She was also among the handful of graduates awarded the Red Seal Certificate, issued by the Interprovincial Standards Red Seal Program, which permits 55 different industrial trades to work in any province without any additional qualifications.

Ross graduated from Queen’s University and was teaching high school French and chemistry when she decided to enroll at Victoria University to earn a master’s degree in chemistry. But before hitting the books again she wanted to hit the road, so she spent some time travelling in New Zealand and Australia. She secured a work visa in New Zealand and heard a contractor was looking for an apprentice carpenter.

Ross, 29, applied for the job and was told she couldn’t do the work because she’s a girl. “Just watch me” was part of her response, but she also negotiated an on-the-job test and was hired fulltime.

She built highrise apartment hotels in New Zealand for two years as a registered apprentice and fell in love with her new career.

Her apprenticeship training in New Zealand was fully documented by her employer and when she applied to Local 27’s apprenticeship training she was credited with her two years in New Zealand.

Ontario apprenticeship courses are four-years long. Carpentry courses are based at Local 27’s huge training centre on Roundtree Dairy Road in Woodbridge. Many in the home building industry will know it as the venue for BILD’s annual builder awards banquet. That’s at the front of the house. Behind the banquet hall is a huge training centre jointly funded and managed by Local 27 and the general contractors division of the Toronto Construction Association.

The centre also trains floor covering

installers and drywallers.

Eddie Thornton, now retired as executive director of the centre, has said that parents create one of the biggest obstacles to attracting young people into the lucrative construction trades.

“They want their children to go to university and get white-collar jobs,” said Thornton. “That often results in \$40,000 of debt and they end up in jobs they don’t like, or can’t get jobs in the careers for which they trained.”

Ross’ father is vice principal at one of Scarborough’s largest elementary schools and she has five siblings. Her twin brother, Michael, is a PhD candidate in electrical engineering at McGill University. Another brother, Bryan, is doing his medical residency, and sister Stephanie earned a master’s degree in anatomy and will start nursing school in September. A younger brother is studying engineering physics at Queen’s.

Bryan’s twin Kathleen, 27, had been teaching high school but has quit to follow her older sister into carpentry. She is in the apprenticeship program at Local 27. Kathleen also works for her older sister’s newly-created home renovation company, Ross Construction and Design.

Cristina Selva, director of training at the centre, said Nicole was the only female in her graduating class of 100 carpenters in November and there are no females in the next graduating class. “But there is a growing interest and awareness by young women in the value of careers in the construction trades.”



Nicole Ross, left, has started her own carpentry company and her sister, Kathleen, works with her

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