

PROGRAM: Orleans Technical College

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# The Philadelphia Tribune

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Orleans Technical College is seeing more women enroll in the school. Althea Burgett was the only woman in her recent six-month Residential and Commercial Electricity class. — PHOTO BY JEANETTE RATTLE

When Althea Burgett has gone to interview for electrician jobs wearing makeup and high heels, she said, the interviewer always looks at her a little funny.

“People are looking at me like, ‘Can you swing a hammer? Are you in the right interview?’” Burgett said, laughing.

Still, Burgett, who was the only woman out of 20 students to complete a recent six-month residential and commercial electricity class at Orleans Technical College, has received two job offers — one to be a locomotive engineer for New Jersey Transit and another to be a signal maintainer for SEPTA.

Ten other women are on track to graduate from Orleans Tech this month, including five in carpentry and five in building and maintenance, according to administrators at the nonprofit career school operated by JEVS Human Services.

Women have enrolled in the electrical course in the past, but none in the last group of graduates. Two other courses — A/C refrigeration and heating (HVAC) and plumbing and heating — don’t have any female students currently enlisted, but did in the last group of graduates. Since 2003, 24 women have graduated in residential and commercial electricity.

At the end of 2016, approximately 939,000 women were employed in various occupation sectors of the construction industry, accounting for less than 10 percent of construction workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Of those, 12,832 worked in the electrical field, representing 2 percent of all workers in that industry. The median income for a woman who is an electrician is over \$50,000.

“The number of women at Orleans Tech is consistently on the rise, which means a range of industries are being enhanced with talented people — and that more and more individuals are finding their niche in fulfilling careers that allow them to support themselves and their families,” said Bill Lynch, president of Orleans Technical College, in a statement. “Again and again we hear from students who had never previously considered the building trades as a legitimate career option.”

Orleans Tech building maintenance instructor Linda Dunphy said her female students drive the males in her class to strive harder because no man wants to be “outdone by a girl.”

“I’ve been teaching for almost 20 years and I love the opportunities I have to support women pursuing their dreams in a ‘man’s’ industry,” Dunphy said in a statement.

“Because building maintenance includes so many disciplines — ranging from carpentry and electric to heating and A/C — right off the bat I can nurture women not to feel limited, but to explore and choose.”

A Philadelphia native and Central High School graduate, Burgett initially attended school at Moore College of Art and Design to study fashion design, but left after a semester once she realized how long it would be before she got to actually sew.

From there, she worked as a server at a restaurant, then at a dessert shop. In 2010, she began to bake her own goods. She opened a brick and mortar shop in 2017, and closed it a year later.

“I felt that at the time, I wasn’t in the financial space to sustain the business and my household,” said Burgett, a single mother to a 1-year-old and a 7-year-old. “I felt like I really didn’t want to go back to school; but I felt that if I did, trade school was definitely going to be what I preferred versus going back to a two-year or four-year program in another college.”

Burgett says the skills she learned in baking are easily transferable in her new trade.

“There was a lot of detail-oriented work that I did,” she said. “Doing that actually prepared me to be able to work with small tools and being able to have the patience to work with small items when I was in my electrical class.”

She completed her class on Feb. 13 with a 4.0 grade-point average.

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Burgett said she knows that many people think those who work in the building trades are not smart enough to go to college, but it's "honestly the opposite."

Burgett, 29, hopes to encourage women to not feel intimidated to attend technical school or try something unconventional. "As a woman, it's actually nice to be able to explore your options, the ones you don't think you would be good at," she said.

Gary Caines, Burgett's father, said his daughter's success doesn't surprise him.

"This should be a good move, it's a lot of opportunities," Caines said. "It fills two slots. She's a woman and she's Black. Hopefully in the electrical field, she will achieve the success that she's always striven for."