

PROGRAM: Orleans Technical College

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By Claudia Salvato, Northeast Times

The first full week in March is National Women in Construction Week, or WIC for short. This initiative was created by the National Association of Women in Construction to “raise awareness and celebrate the work of women in the construction industry across the country.”

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 11% of workers in the construction industry are female. However, Orleans Technical College in the Northeast predicts that the number could rise.

Debbie Bello, Director of Admissions at Orleans Tech, said that traditionally the trades were dominated by white men, but now, many different groups are becoming interested.

“It’s always been tradesmen, not tradeswomen or tradespeople. It’s just that. I think the world is changing,” Bello said.

She suggested that as baby boomers retire, and as people reevaluate their lives during the pandemic, more people may join the trade industry who haven’t considered it before. And that includes women.

“Usually if I find women coming in here for a tour or calling on the phone, they’ve had some experience with doing some type of hands-on work,” Bello said. “Maybe they were side by side with their dad or their grandfather, and they liked it.”

Georgetta Wellman, who goes by Penny, will graduate this month from the building maintenance program at Orleans. This program studies skills such as carpentry, electrical, plumbing, tiling and appliance repair to prepare students for home and building careers.

Wellman earned a bachelor’s degree in exercise science with the intention of becoming a physical therapist. But she found the job monotonous and realized that it wasn’t her passion.

Then, she and her husband bought their first home.

“I was doing little things around the house and then I did a refresh to my powder room, and in doing that I just was like, ‘I love this, this is what I want to do.’ ”

Wellman constructed a barn door for their powder room and felt satisfaction from her hands-on work. With the encouragement of her husband, she joined the carpentry program at Orleans and later switched to building maintenance.

“People go through life and don’t really know, ‘Where am I going? What am I doing?’ and some people really never find their true purpose. But I feel like I’ve found what I really love and I’m so happy to have found it,” Wellman said.

She plans to start her own contracting business in the future.

In terms of being a woman in a male-dominated field, Wellman said she thinks women don’t get involved because they don’t see themselves represented. They may count themselves out because of the stereotype.

“I don’t feel intimidated and I am the best,” Wellman said. “I feel like being a woman, you bring a different perspective to things. I think it’s an asset.”

In the last 5 years, Orleans Tech has had 46 women total come through its construction programs, and they hope to welcome more this year.