

WOMEN IN THE TRADES

As more women choose a career in the male-dominated construction industry, the rules are starting to change, but there are still hurdles that need to be overcome

By Lisa Kopochinski

Whoever said the construction industry is a man's world hasn't met Meighan Moffitt, Courtney Stinson, or Carly Frew.

These three impressive women are journeymen—or rather journeypersons—who continue to prove themselves and are respected by the industry and the communities they live in.

MEIGHAN MOFFITT

Meighan Moffitt is a journeyman refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic who works at Airtech Heating & Air Conditioning as a service technician in Lethbridge, Alta. Born and raised in Brandon, Man., she moved to Alberta when she turned 18 largely because her mother wanted her to have a chance to succeed.

"She didn't think I would do well with the direction I was going straight out of high school," recalls Moffitt. "I moved to Lethbridge at 20 and studied criminal justice. I worked at the University of Lethbridge in security for eight years until I had my twin boys. I was then hired by Airtech for my refrigeration and AC mechanic apprenticeship when my twins were one and a half years old and haven't looked back."



Meighan Moffitt is the first female journeyman south of Calgary and has been with Airtech Heating & Air Conditioning for 11 years.

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Moffitt studied at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary in a four-year program to attain her accreditation. As the first female journeyman south of Calgary—a huge achievement—she has been with Airtech for 11 years and loves her job, where she performs regular maintenance and repair work on HVAC and refrigeration equipment. The scope of her role is large and diverse and includes wearing many hats—diagnosing and repairing equipment, scheduling jobs, billing, providing customer service, teaching apprentices, and much more.

“We are in many different businesses and homes and get to visit with all types of people,” says Moffitt. “Every day is a new adventure. I enjoy the customer relationships I have built over the years. And, I have lots of little old ladies that just *love* having a female technician.”

As much as she enjoys her job, she says being a woman in this field has been challenging at times and has required her to have a thick skin. For example, Moffitt was forced to learn things faster because customers—mostly older men—didn’t believe she could fix it and questioned everything she did. They would call her boss and question her diagnosis on a regular basis. Others would call and complain about her—without reason—because they thought a woman shouldn’t be allowed to do work like this.

“I couldn’t believe there were men out there that believed I should be at home with my kids not leaving the kitchen,” she says. “I proved myself time after time and believe I have made a positive influence altering this old perception.”

Moffitt is also thankful to Airtech and her boss, Lance—who went to bat for her many times—and feels lucky to have a great group of men who have treated her like one of the guys. For women who are considering a career in a male-dominated field such as construction, Moffitt offers this advice.

“It takes a lot of time to gain their trust and confidence in your work, but you will get there. Be prepared to work hard and the payoff is fantastic,” says Moffitt. “We are made and built differently for a reason, and that’s okay. We find different ways to do the same job. Because you are a woman, you will have customers that will be ecstatic that you are at their house. These customers are the ones that make your job so much better.”

COURTNEY STINSON

Courtney Stinson is a Red Seal journeyman refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic who has been working as a service technician at KB Heating and Air Conditioning in Lethbridge since April 2018. She started in the trade in 2013.

Born in Lethbridge, but raised in the country 25 minutes from the city, she recalls spending a lot of time outside exploring, in addition to playing every sport her school offered. She says this gave her a sense of team mentality that has helped in her career.

In her job, Stinson diagnoses, repairs, and maintains HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) equipment in residential and commercial buildings.

“I’m the person who comes to your house or business to fix and maintain your furnace, ventilation, or air-conditioning systems,” says Stinson. “Some of my responsibilities include maintaining relationships with my customers. That is, to educate, inform, discuss, and alleviate the fears about the equipment.”

Other responsibilities include maintaining her work vehicle, reporting any problems to the company’s mechanic, and communicating with coworkers, office, and dispatch to ensure jobs are done and when help is needed. She also helps out with parts to keep the trucks and shop stocked and rolling.

Stinson studied at SAIT in its four-year program where she was the only woman in her class every year, and one of perhaps 30 in the building. A self-described tomboy, she had a lot of guy friends growing up, so she never felt out of place.

“Most people I’ve met actually love seeing ladies in the field and wish there were more. I’ve had nothing but support from my coworkers and people on job sites over the years,” she says. “There will always be people who will give you grief no matter what you do, but the schooling and hands-on training gives you the confidence you need to deal with that. I’ve had comments made and looks from some stubborn customers, but I’ve chosen to ignore it and be professional. My team and friends have always had my back.”

What Stinson likes most about her job is having the knowledge to help people and make them feel safe, whether it’s helping a grandmother when it’s cold, or educating a new



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homeowner about their equipment, systems, and mechanical components.

She is also pleased that she has the knowledge to do most basic electrical and plumbing work around her own house. This was evident one day when she came home from work and found a pipe had burst and flooded three floors. She immediately knew what to do and had it fixed with the water back on within an hour.

As for advice to other women who are interested in learning a trade, Stinson doesn't miss a beat.

"Get out there and try it! There is nothing wrong with not liking it and changing your mind. One thing about the trades is that you can get paid to try it and maybe learn something practical even if you don't end up going with it," says Stinson. "The knowledge, independence, and friends I've met along the way have been unbelievable. Let the haters hate. You will be proud of yourself and that's all that matters."

CARLY FREW

Carly Frew is a lead journeyman electrician and communications technician at South Alta Communications in Lethbridge, who says her upbringing on a hobby farm near Trail, B.C. helped prepare her for her career. Not only did it enable her to become handy with different types of tools and machines, but it also made her realize she did not want an office job.

"When graduation came, I really was unsure of my future direction," she recalls. "I signed up for a week-long program

called STEPS [Skilled Trades Exploratory Program] for women at a nearby college. Upon completion of the course, I decided to pursue becoming an electrician."

In her position at South Alta, some of her responsibilities include business telephone systems; structured network cabling; single-mode and multimode fiber optic cabling, and fiber fusion splicing; VoIP and cloud-based and hosted IP telephones and peripherals; and IP video surveillance systems, among others.

"I enjoy the diversity in the work that I do. I get to travel all over southern Alberta and B.C. and get the opportunity to apply my skills in every applicable fashion," says Frew. "The places I work can range anywhere from late 1800s to early 1900s heritage sites, new state-of-the-art buildings, feedlots, jails, hospitals, police stations, and small communication stations hidden in plain sight all over the province."

While it's evident Frew loves her career, it has not been without its challenges—largely because she is female. She recalls an early unpleasant experience when she went to Alberta to apply for jobs. She dropped resumes off at electrical companies, but often never heard back. She was also told "no" flat out and even had one company owner laugh at her and walk away. However, when Frew applied at Dorren Electric in 2007, her boss hired her on the spot.

"I did my apprenticeship through Dorren and was then offered a job at South Alta in 2014," she recalls. "I wanted to switch up my career to more of the communications end of things. However, on my first day on the job as an apprentice at Dorren Electric, I was asked if I was a lesbian or bisexual. Apparently, you can't be straight in order to be a female electrician. It was pretty comical."

She adds that at nearly every job she was sent to, customers would ask her male apprentice questions. "He would respond that he had no clue, and they would have to ask his journeyman as she's in charge, and he would point to me."

Unfortunately, there were other incidents over the years. For example, Frew's boss at South Alta wanted her to start taking over some of his clients. She recalls that they blatantly stated they did not want a female to do the work. Her boss didn't really give the customers a choice, as he knew Frew had quite a thick skin and could deal with the guys when needed. On her first service call, the guys were a bit unpleasant. However, after a few experiences like this, they warmed up to her and started calling the shop just to ask questions and get some assistance. What started as something unpleasant turned into something positive.

"The biggest thing that matters is who you work for and who you work with," says Frew. "This will 100 per cent dictate your career. Lean into the people who will take you under their wing and show you the ropes. Some of my co-workers became my biggest supporters throughout my apprenticeship and still are to this day. Do not be afraid to take a stand for anything you see that you believe is not appropriate or acceptable. In all, have fun, and don't be afraid to get your hands dirty!"

Wise words indeed. ▲



Carly Frew is a lead journeyman electrician and communications technician at South Alta Communications in Lethbridge.