

BWiC Profile Featuring Tonye Hayden Berry, Local 3

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You could say Tonye has trade skills in her blood. But even with her father working as a pipe-fitter, her mother as a retired iron worker, her sister a journey iron worker and her aunt working in Local 4, she decided to take a different route and applied to several colleges. She was accepted but unfortunately due to financial challenges could not attend.

After graduating high school in Marblehead, she went straight to work at Micro Center in Cambridge as a customer service rep in the computer department. It was decent pay but offered no benefits, so when, at the age of 22, she became pregnant, she was forced to use all her vacation time for maternity leave and then was eventually laid off. When unemployment ran out she was forced to go on food stamps, taking her to the realization that she needed to make some quick decisions on how to support herself and her young son. When she saw a sign promoting the ABCD program, she made the phone call and passed her interview with flying colors. Considering herself as “quite girlie” she surprised even herself when she submitted the application to become a brick layer. She literally knew nothing about the trade but she received her acceptance letter two weeks later and the choice was basically out of her hands. Typically, a 16-week program, the Union decided to extend school an additional 4 weeks to get everyone placed. With only a \$75.00 per day stipend, surviving was difficult, but it was better than nothing.

Once she began work she started facing many challenges including the scarcity of women in the trade and the diminishing call for brick work in the city. While working on the Dudley Municipal Building for over a year, she recognized she had an affinity towards water -proofing, made the shift and so began her career in earnest. Although she faced different kinds of challenges in this unique field, such as working with rubber and chemicals, she had enough experience and confidence to ask questions and advocate for her own safety.

She experienced her first “lay-off” in three years this past winter due to severe weather conditions. And although she does not get paid fully if she is not

working, she collects the highest pay out during those times and says she stays well prepared by maintaining a savings account year-round to help supplement the temporary drop in income.

With a family to take care of, good insurance coverage is critical. She said she was glad she asked lots of questions when she first started on the minimum requirements to receive health benefits (1,000 hours per year), life insurance and pension information, other-wise she may have missed out. She advises everyone (not just women) who are just starting out in the trades to take an active role in what you need for your life-style by asking questions on all the options that may be available to you.

With more than 5 years under her belt, Tonye has a work ethic that should be admired. She strongly believes that “on time is late-early is on time” and practices what she preaches, even with the challenges that come along with it. The hours for the trades are not your traditional 9 to 5, which means day-care and school hours can be quite a struggle. She says she has always been fortunate to have help from family members living close by, but at the end of the day she still must take personal time off to attend school events, kids sick and vacation days, leaving her with no personal time off.

She is currently working for Folan Waterproofing and would love to stay on with them if possible. In today’s market women are a high commodity, especially those who are as talented and committed as she, but Tonye doesn’t consider that a pass. She always looking for ways to perfect her skills and increase her knowledge by listening and learning. She says one day she would like to be the first female steward. It’s just another way of being pro-active to move ahead.

With the recent loss her brother, Tonye has prioritized giving back to the community through speaking engagements and volunteer work. She hopes that she can inspire local students to find the same passion she has for commercial construction and trades work. “It’s not for everyone” she says, “but for those who commit it can be a most rewarding career”.

It is apparent that Tonye has taken her commitment in the trades to the next level, and her future is guaranteed to be one of success through her sheer determination!

Thank- you Tonye for sharing your experiences and supporting our mission of Building Women in Construction!