

## She didn't quit, she didn't cry, she became a union carpenter

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By Diana Nelson Jones / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Tenika Chavis's husband was in the Army overseas six years ago, she was working, fretting about the repairs their South Oakland home needed.

She worked nights cleaning banks. Her mother babysat her two daughters. When she could afford a contractor, the work was often shoddy or incomplete.

"I thought I could learn to do it better than that," she said, "and if I could learn to make my own repairs, I could make money doing repairs for other people."

She couldn't have imagined her path to self-reliance would lead onto a bridge above Route 51, where she would be the only woman, and the only African American, on a crew of heavy highway carpenters.

A few years before, in college, she had prepared for a career in information science and technology, graduating from Penn State University. But her first "dream job" hogged her life, from before daylight to long after dark. She never saw her daughters.

Other forces were tugging at her, too, notably an entrepreneurial spirit.

Ms. Chavis, 36, grew up in Prattville, Ala., sort of. The family moved a lot because her father's work was erratic.

"By the time I was 17, we had lived in 23 places," she said, pausing to let that sink in.

Her mother left her father when Tenika was 12 and moved her five children to Clairton to stay with a friend. Pittsburgh took hold.

After leaving the IT job, Ms. Chavis worked for social service agencies, then started her own cleaning company, but she wasn't making enough. Home repairs seemed more lucrative.

She began taking basic construction classes, then found some property investors who would train her in property management.

"They taught me how to evaluate real estate, how to do repairs, how to fill out a sales contract, how to do comparative property analysis, and if they needed a door unlocked at 4 a.m., they could text me," she said.

"Then I heard the union had a program" for apprentice labor, "and I took every job they offered."

One was on that highway construction crew, where she was treated as both invisible and in the way. She suffered "nasty jokes and innuendos, pranks to see if I would cry," she said, "I thought, every day, 'Make it to break,' then, 'Make it to lunch.' Every day, I just kept showing up. The guys said, 'You're not going anywhere, are you?' and I said, 'Not as long as the checks clear.'

"Eventually, things started clicking and I felt like I knew what I was doing."

She became a union carpenter in 2013.

"I realized I have a thing about fixing houses," she said, "and that real estate is a way to stability for my family. Before, I felt invisible, but I have really re-created how I see myself in the world."

She and her husband, James, from whom she had been estranged, are back together. He works at Pittsburgh International Airport in security.

She now owns two rental properties, in the Hill District and Larimer, and hopes to buy more for social agencies to settle refugees into.

Her uniform is jeans, a pink T-shirt with her logo on it, TDC Contracting, and heavy work boots. She is compact and petite, has a luminous smile and a bounce in her step.

She started her business with a \$5,000 start-up grant from Urban Innovation 21, buying equipment and accounting software. Her car is her headquarters, office and supply cabinet.

Last spring, she graduated from a six-week training course sponsored by Omicelo Cares, Neighborhood Allies and the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The students learned about real estate law, zoning and conservatorship; how to analyze real estate for investment; how to create a financial statement and solve gaps in funding; how to get and use new market tax credits.

Omicelo Cares trains minority strivers to build wealth through real estate and entrepreneurship.

“Everyone in the class was a woman, a minority” or both, said Zak Thomas, senior program officer for Neighborhood Allies, a community development philanthropy. “That reflects who we were trying to reach.”

At a recent fund-raiser for Omicelo Cares, where Ms. Chavis was selected to speak, she did a little jog-dance to release nerves and exhaled loudly to appreciative chuckles from the audience.

She rubbed her hands together, drew a breath and said, “I am a military wife. I spend most of my time working as the Lady Carpenter.”

In a row near the back, her 13-year-old daughter Danielle mouthed the words “lady carpenter.”

Ms. Chavis urged minority entrepreneurs to help each other.

“Part of the solution is to pay livable wages,” she said, starting to relax. “A man with a wife and kids can’t make it on \$7.25 an hour. As an employer, that’s great for my bottom line, but how long is he going to stay with me? How happy will he be? It’ll cost me more money in the long run” to keep training people.

Always alert when she sees other African Americans doing what she does, she stopped a man one day last year in the parking lot of a construction materials store.

LaMarr Reeves was putting equipment in his truck when she walked up to him.

“She said, ‘Is this all yours?’” he said, “and I said, ‘What? Of course it’s mine.’”

Ms. Chavis saw a chance for two minority contractors to help each other.

“She had prospects and wanted to work with me,” Mr. Reeves said. “She gave off a really good vibe. We play off each other,” sharing jobs and workers. “If she can’t get to something, she’ll call” and vice versa.

Ms. Chavis has a growing network of subcontractors, connections to property investors and a lineup of repair work. She makes sure her schedule allows time to take her girls -- Danielle, 13, Madison, 10, and Ayana, 5 -- to dance class, science camp and other activities.

She finally has the flexibility she wanted for her kids, but now work is so steady that her own house has had to wait for the repairs it needs.

Chuckling at the irony, she said, "I know. I told myself that I would get to it this year."

*Diana Nelson Jones: [djones@post-gazette.com](mailto:djones@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1626.*