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How'd you land that great job?

April 11, 2007

Tami St. Paul, construction apprenticeship coordinator

By **Michelle Goodman**
NWjobs.com

The job:

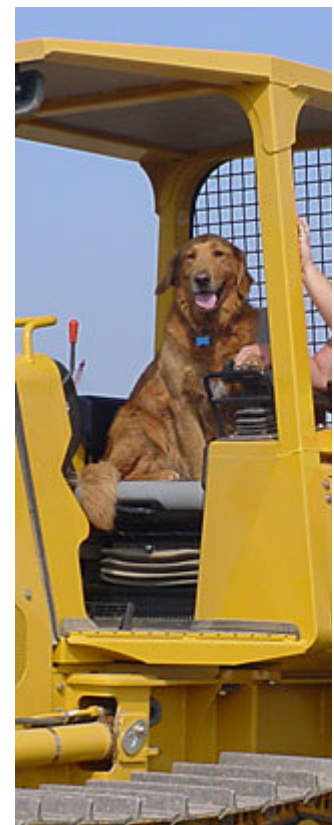
Former ski instructor and river rafting guide Tami St. Paul has built a career on her love of the outdoors. For the past six and a half years, she's worked as an apprenticeship coordinator for the Operating Engineers Regional Training Program of Western and Central Washington. Simply put, she recruits, trains and helps find employment for apprentices who "earn as they learn" the nuts and bolts of the construction trade. She also spearheads community outreach efforts at schools and career fairs to educate potential candidates about opportunities in construction.

Q: How did you get into this line of work?

I dropped out of college because I couldn't really find anything I wanted to do there. I started my own construction apprenticeship 20 years ago and then became a journeyman working out in the field. I was a heavy-equipment operator. I used dirt equipment first-loaders and 'dozers and backhoes. Then I ran cranes and boom trucks [smaller cranes]. There was this readerboard running through my head: "I was so born to do this, this is so much fun." And some rainy spring day when I was up to my armpits was an opening. On a whim I put in an application and I got [this] job.

Q: What steps did you take to prepare for your construction career?

A: I went to a pre-apprenticeship program because I wanted to make sure I was making the right decision. Being book-educated, I wanted to pursue it methodically. So I did a 5- to 6-month program at Renton Technical College called ANEW. It allowed me to feel like I was making a really good, informed decision. They exposed us



JIM AGNEW

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to carpentry and electrical work. They brought in a bunch of trade professionals who came to talk to us. They also have a physical fitness program.

Q: What's a typical day at work like for you?

A: There is no typical day. Some days I get up and I have paperwork I need to do. And some days I get up at 4 a.m. and head into the field and check on the kids. Then I might hole up in my truck and do some e-mail triage. It's just reacting as necessary.

Q: What types of fires do you regularly have to put out?

A: If an apprentice is having trouble on the job, I talk to them. Sometimes they show up late for work or they damage something-issues like that. Or if they've achieved a level of proficiency but the contractor [they're working for] doesn't want to move them up, then I go out and talk to the contractor and advocate for the apprentices. I smooth things over when tempers get frayed, especially at the end of summer when everybody's been working a ton of hours. When feathers get fluffed, I go unfluff.

Q: What's your favorite part of the job?

A: I get to make a difference in people's lives and to watch the confidence in them bloom as they learn a new skill and trade. Plus, I get to put on my comfy boots and my jeans and my comfy sweatshirt and play on this giant Tonka t sandbox in the world. I don't have to worry about putting on makeup or doing my hair. They pay me for it. And they pay me well.

Q: What advice can you offer those who want to work in construction?

A: It's not so much preparing for this career as being someone who is predisposed to it: you're fairly fit; you like to be outdoors; you don't care if it's raining; you don't care if you get dirty and greasy. So do something outdoors and see if you like it. Work at a tree farm. Work at a nursery. Talk to people doing the job. Get on the Internet and see what's available. The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries Web site has apprenticeships available in the state listed on it.

"Take an active part in your apprenticeship. From the very beginning, I attended union meetings. Initially the reason I went was because I wanted to know how they were spending my money. But I know a lot of people in the union and they got to see that I was just about the job, but about the union. "

Explore:

[Operating Engineers' Registered Training Program](#)

[Washington State Department of Labor and Industries web](#)

[Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Employment for Women](#)

[28th Annual Washington State Trades Fair \(April 27, 28\)](#)

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