



SUZANNE DeCHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**ENTRY LEVEL**

## Where Few Women Go: A Building Site

By **ROBIN FINN**

Sharon Darling, 24, is a graduate of a program at Nontraditional Employment for Women, a group that prepares women for union jobs in the building trades, and has been an apprentice with Electricians Local 3 for nearly a year. In five years, she will attain the status of mechanic, earning \$40 to \$50 an hour and the authority to delegate grunt work like hauling 90-pound bales of wire to apprentices like her. She lives in Midwood, Brooklyn.

**A start in carpentry:** I attended a lot of schools with performing arts programs, and I came across carpentry when I was at P.S. 152. I found out I really loved building sets for the school musicals; I helped build the set for "The Lion King," and I was in it, too. I went to Sullivan County Community College upstate and got an associate's degree in construction technology. Then I came back to the city and couldn't find a job.

**The switch to electric:** A friend of mine told me her grandmother had gone to the

NEW program and become a carpenter, so one day I went to an information session. I took a math and English exam, went through an interview, and got accepted to their program. I thought I would be going for carpentry, but I switched to electric because I loved the math theory that you have to use: math, physics, science, everything. This is the best trade as far as using your brain goes.

**Fashion interval:** I had to wait a year to take the test to get into the union. You have to wait until a spot opens. The test takes about five hours; it's really tedious, and those who do pass it, I would call them warriors. I worked at the J. Crew at Rockefeller Center until the union notified me; all that year I was thinking, "I have to get this career; I have to get a job that gives you benefits and all the things you need to survive in this world."

**On the job by 7:** I was never a morning person, but when you're in the union, you have to be at the site by 7 and tardiness is not tolerated. We're like vampires, up at 4 or 5 in the morning so we can get wherever

we need to be. I live in Brooklyn but my job site for the last eight months is at a school that's being built in Queens; it takes an hour to get there.

**The only girl:** The first job I was assigned was in Brooklyn. It was at a new school that was pretty much finished, so I was only there three days. The first day was scary. Everybody is looking at you because you're the only girl. My second job, the one I'm still at, was much better. The foreman got me straight to work at 7, and I felt like, "I can do this." The fear was gone.

**The name thing:** Oh, God, they call me "darling" all day long, and they say they can get away with it because it's my name. As long as they don't take it no further, I'm O.K. with it. But you keep it moving; you can't mingle. When you're on a big job, you've got carpenters and roofers and plumbers. There can be a thousand men. And you know the stereotypes men have: They think I should be home having babies, or doing hair or nails, girly stuff. But I'm hanging in here; I'm carrying the same tools. I feel like I'm worth something.