



The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies

Pipe Dreams

A Manifesto for Local 1 Apprentices

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



EMPIRE STATE
COLLEGE

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Pipe Dreams

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Foreword

Pipe Dreams is about more than the unfulfillable aspirations of young men and women mastering a trade. It is a testament to the spirit of working people everywhere, without whom nothing would get done and but for whom nothing is done.

The irony is that however indispensable working people are as a group, each of us is treated as if we are individually dispensable. This is the tragedy of our time. Why are hedge fund managers paid so well and plumbers, even good ones, even the ones who make real money, paid, comparatively speaking, so much less?

The answer in part lies with the reluctance of plumbers (and electricians and teachers and secretaries and custodians and day laborers and nurses' aids and the rest of us) to tell our stories and make ourselves heard. Too many of us have internalized the lie that those who work with our hands, or get dirty at work, or serve others, don't have stories to tell and deserve what we get, however little it might be.

What makes us worth, in some cases a penny, and in other cases a C-note and then some? The answer lies in our value and in our values.

We need to do things of value, to contribute something that is worth something to somebody. That is our value.

But beyond that, we too must be valued, recognized as worth every penny. Those are our values.

Whom do we recognize? Whom do we reward? Those whom we admire. Those whose stories move and motivate us. The difference between living in a world of hoarding and greed, on the one hand, and a world of sharing and honor, on the other, is in the stories we tell.

Is sharing and caring a pipe dream? Not if we but listen to their stories. Here are some.

– Michael Merrill
Dean

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Introduction

“Sorry you had to read this. I don’t write; I work.”

That was the closing statement of an essay written by a student in one of the College Writing classes here at the UA Local 1 Plumbers Training Center. The truth is that many of my students didn’t consider themselves writers in any way; others questioned the purpose of a writing class in the plumbing program; and still others had somehow come to believe that they were incapable of writing anything of merit, scholarship, or of interest to anyone else. These sentiments are fairly common among students from a variety of majors, so I wasn’t too shocked to hear the apprentices in UA Local 1 saying the same things.

I was, however, very bothered by the phrase, “Sorry you had to read this. I don’t write; I work,” because in eight years of teaching no student had ever apologized for their writing as a whole. Sure, I’ve gotten emails apologizing for inappropriate language, but this was the first time a student apologized for writing – not for his ideas or his language, but his writing as an action, as if to imply he had no business writing in the first place because he’s a working guy.

So then what does it mean to be a worker? And what does it mean to be a writer? What do writing and work have in common? And *why should* plumbers and other trades people brush up on their writing skills for the future of their unions? Well, in the shortest explanation possible: because writing is both a tool and a skill.

Writing is used to draft collective bargaining agreements, legislation, contracts, invoices, emails, text messages and a slew of other things. It is a way of organizing our ideas, whether it’s a coffee list, a supply list, a work plan, a meeting agenda and so on. Just like the mastering of welding, braising and any other skills students learn during their apprenticeship, writing is a vital part of labor education because writing is happening everywhere and by everyone at every level.

I wanted students to recognize that they are all writers, they are all thinkers, they all have something valuable to contribute to the world – and that their individual voices have significance in the collective community.

Growing up, I remember riding around in my father's van with a cargo of tools and supplies clinking with each pothole in the road. On those drives to school, he'd tell stories of interesting relics he discovered on an old job site or tell me (again) about the time he fell off the ladder while running wire at a big milk factory. My grandfather had similar stories as a unionized jeweler, and I have photos of him protesting on the streets with his fellow brothers and sisters. My grandmother also shared her stories with us, revealing how she and her seamstress sisters didn't really speak English well but between her Greek and their Italian they found a way to communicate – and eventually they all learned English together

The oral tradition of story telling is an integral part of the working class collective, and to a large degree it's how many of us have come to understand the world. Think of how many stories you hear or tell on the job each day. Maybe it's about a greedy higher-up who just got busted, or about a mishap on another job, or maybe it's a cautionary tale being told to an apprentice. Whatever it is, storytelling has its place on the job site, in the shanty, at a union meeting and every place else where work is happening.

This anthology is not only a testament to the ability of plumbers to write; it's a legacy these apprentices are leaving behind for classes that follow – a legacy that will forever tell their stories as they wanted them told.

Finding the Right Pitch

(or, How I found my way into UA Local 1)

The Man Who Became an Apprentice

Justin Jackson

It was June 6, 2006. Throughout the halls of my high school, cheers of success echoed. Alfred E. Smith High School had just come in first place for the fifth year in a row in the Plumbing State Competition. I could not understand how the seniors could be so joyful for winning a competition in plumbing. At the time, I had no interest in the construction trades especially plumbing. During my last term as a junior, I was approached by my guidance counselor who handed me a paper, a college application – the paper which most students stress about in their last moments of high school. I was not given a real one but a preparatory college application which brought on the question of “What did I want to do for the rest of my life?” and “What were my plans after high school?” They were the questions I avoided and took a long time to answer. But they were the questions that would lead to me becoming a plumbing apprentice.

During the end of every month I would come home to see my father take his mail and toss it in a growing pile. We already knew the contents of the letters, just another bill he owed whether it was Con Edison, rent, credit cards, car insurance, or the thieves from Sprint. My father highly supported education and pushed me and my brother toward going to college. My father completed college himself in 1998, after which he got a job at Cablevision to pay his way through college and successfully graduate with a bachelor’s degree in accounting. After college he realized that he did not want to be an accountant for the rest of his life and decided to stay at the secure position he had at Cablevision. I was afraid I was just like my father. Before college we were both unsure of what we wanted to do in life. I did not want to follow in my father’s footsteps and go to college unsure of my career and be forced to pick a major that I was not completely interested in, wasting time, effort and money.

My father faced a hardship after he got injured on the job in 2003. Not being able to work, my father decided to sue Cablevision and in the end got fired in the process. He was forced to use his settlement money, savings, 401K and life insurance to keep up with his bills. All of these resources were depleted in the four year time that he was unemployed as he bounced from job to job. At the age of 17 and not knowing the full story, I felt that my father was strong enough to pick himself up from where he fell. At the time I thought it was not

my time and responsibility to think about bills. The only thing I felt was my responsibility was to finish high school and go on to college, though from my situation college was looking more far off than I thought.

At school I became really close to my plumbing teachers, Edward Lloyd and Rafael Guzman. I was taught a stronger work ethic and drive, which was instituted by Mr. Lloyd. For two hours everyday, I worked hands on doing plumbing in a model house built inside the school under the supervision of Mr. Lloyd. For the other one hour, other students and I were taught plumbing by Mr. Guzman. My teachers opened a door to a new option besides college, becoming a plumber. I was told about the Local 1 Plumbers, the City Plumbers and the Master Plumbers exam from Mr. Lloyd but didn't know how to become a member. It wasn't until Mr. Guzman told me that an application would be given out to join a program called Construction Skills, which helps people get into the union of their desire.

Even though college seemed farther away, my English teacher, Mr. Manalo, caused me to be more indecisive between college and the Plumbers Local 1. Mr. Manalo did everything he could to show us the benefits of going to college. Not only did he challenge and improve our skills in writing, he was the most dedicated and passionate teacher to his students and our education. Although indecisive, I could not pass up the opportunity to get a Construction Skills application. Mr. Manalo met my expectations with a harsh reaction to the application. He witnessed me and the other students leave his class once a week as ordered to go to the Construction Skills program. A man who strongly influenced students to go to college watched as his students were pushed away from college into the unions.

I was not surprised as Mr. Manalo did not sympathize with me and the other students, but instead pushed us harder than the others. At the end of the year, I was so overwhelmed from my four AP classes, three periods of shop and two other classes to the point that I didn't even research any colleges, write one college essay or fill out one college application. I had decided it just was not my time to go to college. Although my father had a new job, he could not handle it alone and I was not about to put college before my family. With the Plumbers Local 1, I was insured and secure in a comfortable environment for me and my family. It offered a growing salary, 401K, ASB fund, medical and dental benefits, education, on the job training and more. It was clear enough that the Plumbers Local 1 Union was the decision to make.

Circle of Challenge

Deanna F. Gonzalez

It is funny how some things seem to come full circle – points in your life that fade into one another – joining your past with your present. It took a lot of persistence and self motivation to get where I am today – to be a plumbers apprentice. There were many points along my circle of life to place me here, now, in the construction field, in this union, in this industry of men. There was a lot of sweat and tears, strenuous endeavors in unbelievably stressful environments, mind-reforming ways of thinking, and even some bloodshed. It takes a lot to be all that I am and have worked for up to this point in my life. I am more than what you see on the exterior, or even what I verbalize. I am a woman who has done more of what people thought I should not do or better yet, could not do, and have succeeded. It is one thing to push yourself to your limits for personal gain, and yet another to have that bark of the naysayers close enough behind you, to drive you to go above and beyond.

“Above and beyond;” to believe that one phrase could have little or no meaning to some, and life-altering meaning for others. That one phrase can subdue some people from ever standing out from the crowd, and yet for me, with the realization that it is a natural behavior, it has allowed me to propel myself into any life changing action or necessary mission, requiring above measure accomplishment. “Faster Recruit Gonzalez! Faster!” “Aye Ma’am!” “Let’s go there Devil Dog! Push yourself! It takes more than that to become a Marine! Marines are a different breed of human. The minimum is not acceptable! Marines always go one step further. We go above and beyond!” “Yes Ma’am!” I’ll never forget those loud words, or its intended meaning or drive. Now for the rest of my life, I will continue to live by that one phrase, its philosophy, and go above and beyond what is expected of me to remain successful.

I served five honorable years in the United States Marine Corps. I have been and forever will be, one of the “Few and the Proud.” It was the best time of my life thus far. I loved and hated every minute of it; it suited me; it was my passion. To be in the Marine Corps, and to live a life where you do something for someone else and do it admirably was most self-rewarding and to have worn that uniform was the proudest thing I have ever accomplished. It meant the world to me to see the faces of appreciation across this country and throughout the world. Now you might be thinking well why, if I loved being

in the military so much, why am I now a member of Plumbers Local 1? Well to be frank, I injured my knee while on active duty. I am able to function normally in a civilian lifestyle; however, to carry on for another 15 years or so, enduring the rigors of “Marine life,” was not possible for me. So I am now a disabled veteran who is still proud, trying hard to rehab her life and acclimate back into that civilian lifestyle.

I was very nervous getting out of the service wondering how hard it would be for me to adjust out of military life. I was nervous about trying to find a job, and to pretty much start my life over in yet another direction. After my separation from the military, I spent some time enjoying the repose of the unemployed life. However, after my initial goals of employment, for reasons beyond my control, did not pan out accordingly, I began to become a little restless as to what was my next life vocation. I remember speaking to my uncle and talking to him about what was going on with my careers searches. He suggested to me that I visit the Helmets to Hardhats website. My uncle explained to me that Helmets to Hardhats is a program that helps connect veterans like me with careers in the construction industry. At first I just went on the website to appease my uncle. In my family, you do what is asked of you especially if you know they will be expecting a response. Being in the construction field, even though it has a generational background in my family, was not very appealing to me. I knew I was not one to sit behind a desk every day, but I also did not think that being in a field like construction for 40 plus years, was my way to go either. However, regardless of my hesitations, I did as my uncle suggested, viewed the website and posted my résumé.

Not too long after I posted my résumé, I got a response from the New York director of the Helmets to Hardhats program. She contacted me initially via email, and we then later spoke over the telephone. She told me that she viewed my résumé and was pretty impressed by it. She also said that Plumbers Local 1 of New York City was interested in me. After she provided me with some details of what Local 1 was about, I got in touch with my uncle and told him the news. My uncle is a member of the Steamfitters Local 638 of New York City, and while he and the rest of my family members were in that local and would have preferred that I join Local 638, the Plumbers Union for them was acceptable. So now that I had the push and approval of my family, namely my uncle, I decided that I would give being in the construction field a try.

This “temporary” position in my mind has now veered into its second year of a five-year apprenticeship. While I am still struggling personally with fully committing to this field, the longer I stay in, the more I seem to enjoy

and benefit from it. I started with something in my life that provided an unbelievable challenge – now I am in yet another challenging lifestyle. While this time it is not as much as a physical or emotional challenge, rather than being more of a personal and professional one; being a plumbers apprentice is proving to be seemingly satisfying. It was not easy being a female in the military and it is definitely not any easier being a female in the construction industry. I work hard every day, in sometimes rather unnecessary ways, just to “prove” that I belong alongside the men – it is a challenge and it helps to motivate me. Being a plumber in this local may or may not be something I stick with, but it is definitely and most productively another step in my life’s path that hopefully will fade into another point of my endless circle of accomplishments.

How I Became a Plumber

E. V.

As far as I can remember, I did not care about my future. There was nothing out there that I was interested in. I was born in Greece and started school there. My grades were falling and I did not care at all. One year, I remember my father came to Greece and told me that I was going to go to boarding school due to my grades. Well, that did not work out because that year we all moved to America.

My problems with school carried over to America; there was no improvement. I was 7 years old and I started to play for a soccer club called Pancyprian. There was a coach that took me under his wing to teach me soccer so that one day I could play for a professional club, and that opened my eyes about the future. I thought that by becoming a professional soccer player there would be no more school, teachers, books or homework. I was in heaven.

After a couple of years went by, I realized that being a soccer player had no future here in the United States, so I decided to hang out with my friends. I thought that it was the cool thing to do as a teenager and I had little ambition at the time. I thought as long as I had a house to sleep in, food and clothes on my back then there was no problem. My parents would fight with me everyday about my future and ask where I thought my life would be in a couple of years. But I didn't care; I just wanted to hang out with my friends. I lived in the moment and that was all that mattered to me then.

My mother was a full-time housewife who never worked outside the house. My father was a waiter at my uncle's restaurant, Joe Jr.'s in Greenwich Village. That man would wake up every morning at 4 a.m. and go to work until 3 p.m. My father dealt with a lot of crap at work, from his boss all the way to his customers. It was a tough job and a lot of stress came with it.

After a while I started to go to work with my father to make that quick buck. He would take me with him just to show me how hard it is to make that dollar and for me to stay in school so I can have a better future than him. He always sat me down and gave me the same speech about life and how important it is to have a good education. For me, it did not matter. It went in one ear and out the other. He knew that I was not paying attention to him but still gave me that speech.

As the days were passing and I was getting older, I started to work with my father more often. Now that I was older and had some kind of brain, I started to see how hard my father was working. That life that he had was rough, the hours were crazy and the crap he had to deal with was crazy as well. There was not a day that we went home and he complained about work. He always had the rent and food on the table, and he supported four other people by himself.

I started to see life and how fast it was going by me. One day, I realized that this is not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life; this was not my future. I didn't like the restaurant life, and working with family was tough. Waking up at 4 a.m. and getting constantly yelled at by my uncle was stressful. The restaurant had no benefits, no retirement and we were open everyday; there were no holidays.

On a beautiful afternoon my father said to me maybe I should try a mechanical school and learn a trade. I thought it was a good idea and started Apex Technical School for HVAC. In six months, I got my diploma and started to work in a company. My parents were finally happy with me. I started to see the smiles on their faces and how proud they were that this can be my future. I liked what I was doing. The pay was good and there was room to climb up the ladder. I felt more stress-free and accomplished. This was a good career and I would be able to support a family. I felt more like an adult.

Right when I started to climb and found something that I enjoyed doing it also came to an end quickly. My company had a major account in the city, the World Trade Center. On Sept. 11, 2001, two of my coworkers and I were there for work and then we all know what happened. With that, I lost my job and my future. Here I go all over again: my parents crying about my future and me working in the restaurant. Seeing my parents worry again made me feel pretty bad. I had to start all over again at the bottom; everything that I had worked for was gone in an instant.

My father was at work one day and he was sad about what happened. One of his friends and long-time customers asked him what was wrong. My father explained and the man asked to see me. A day later, I met the man and we had a long talk. His name was Joe and he actually was one of the owners of a big construction company. Joe gave me a choice of work as an electrician or a plumber. I chose to be a plumber. I chose to be a plumber because you can always work on the side for extra money. Joe said to me that he was going to get me a job with a company in the union. All I had to do was show

up and the rest would fall into place. He told me that a union worker had a good future ahead of him. Joe kept his word. The boss who hired me did it as a favor to Joe and I started working as an apprentice plumber in the union almost immediately.

That was it. No more restaurants, no sad faces on my parents. The steps to my future had begun. A couple of months later, my father passed away and it was an extremely difficult and emotional time for me. He made sure that he started my path to my future; all I had to do was follow the path that was made for me. I never had a chance to say goodbye or thank him for what he did for me. He taught me how to be a person, respect life and be a hard worker. If it was not for him, I would not have a future like I do now. In my life, I did not choose my future; it was actually given to me.

A NEW Start

Rocchina Mena

I am a second year plumber's apprentice, and how I got here is a pretty crazy story. My dad works for the tile union in New York City. Before he became a mechanic, he was a helper. Going from job to job, he one day came across a woman named Angela. She was a mechanic, so she would set the tiles while my dad would assist her. He became interested in how she got into the business, so he asked her some questions and found it amazing.

When my dad came home he told me all about it. He thought it was unbelievable that he was working for a girl and thought it was very impressive. He said that Angela worked for a school called NEW, which stands for Nontraditional Employment for Women. It's a school just for women who are trying to get into the trades. My dad told me I should try it out because he thought I would do very well at something like this, so I decided to give it a shot.

NEW is a school that you have to apply to and be accepted into because there are so many applicants and only so much space. Once you're accepted at NEW your schooling is free, and they even give you a metro card for each class you attend to help with your transportation expenses. So I applied and when the time came, I was accepted. Since I was working during the days at the time, I decided to take my classes at night. I went to school three nights a week, and had a shop class every Saturday for a total of six weeks. Throughout the program, I decided I wanted to go into the plumbing trade. Basically it sounded interesting and the package, along with many other perks, was very good. After the six weeks were over, I graduated.

So the next step was to wait. NEW was sending out a recommendation to the Plumber's Local 1. Then when the start of the new school year came around, that's when I received my acceptance letter from Local 1. I then had to go to the school to register, which consisted of paperwork and a drug test. I had to go back for orientation, where we were handed a piece of paper with a name and jobsite address and were asked when we were ready to start working. The good thing about going to school was that you would miss a whole day of work to go, and get paid for doing so, and class is only once every two weeks.

Finally, it came ... the day I was nervously dreading: my first day of work. I had to wake up at 4:30 a.m., and at that point I was thinking this was going to be horrible. I was on my way out the door at about 5 a.m., and by the time I arrived at my jobsite, I, of course, couldn't figure out where I had to be inside the big hospital. When I finally found my partner, he led the way and I met the other guys. The day went by pretty smooth and easy going. I'm sure most of the other workers, even in the other trades, were surprised to see a girl on the job because it's uncommon. So, yes, I felt as if everyone was staring at me and watching my every move. I'm sure they were all talking amongst themselves about the "new girl" on the job.

It is very intimidating sometimes being the girl on the job; you always find yourself thinking that you have to prove yourself to the men just to get respect and fit in. I've pretty much adapted myself to this lifestyle of construction now. Not much seems to faze me anymore – that is as of right now, of course. I still seem to catch myself forgetting some guys' names that I don't see that often. I sometimes feel bad, but then I realize that since I am a minority it is much easier for them to remember me, as I stand out in the crowd.

My first year has come and gone so quickly, and this is now the start of my second year. I feel much more comfortable meeting new people on the job now. I also have noticed that I am much more capable of doing a lot more than I was on my first day. I am still enjoying the crazy experience and am excited to keep learning more about it.

Why Am I a Plumber?

Philip Parziale Jr.

I became a plumber because of my father, Philip Parziale Sr. He has been a plumber all his life. Plumbing interested me because I grew up around it. My father was a plumber, and his father was a plumber, and his father was a plumber too. (I also have uncles who are plumbers and a few cousins.) Plumbing has been in my family for well over 75 years. I am a fourth generation plumber, and I am damn proud of it.

Being a plumber requires a lot of skills which I am being trained for by the Plumber's Local 1. I learned that there is more to being a plumber than putting in pipes or plunging out an over-stuffed toilet bowl. You have to be a very knowledgeable person to do plumbing work. When I first started over two years ago, I had some knowledge of the trade from my father, but since I have started the school I have learned a whole lot more. School has taught me to work with cast iron pipe, and that iron pipe is used for waste. Iron pipe also is the most used type of pipe for waste in New York City.

Local 1 also has trained me to use black malleable iron pipe (which is mostly used for gas in this trade) and how to thread the pipe and assemble it. I remember the first time I worked with malleable iron pipe. I was 16 and I put a new boiler in my house. I did it with my father and he showed me how to work with the pipe. I was amazed how the thread just appeared as I ran the 300 machine.

When I was a little boy, I was fascinated with the tool that was used to work cast iron; the no-hub wrench (torque tool) that clicked when you spun it backwards; and the snap-cutter! I wanted to know to use these things! But what fascinated me the most was that you had to melt lead and pour it into the pipe to hold it together. I remember when I was about 9 and my father pulled out the lead pot and put it in our yard. It was a hot summer day and he lit it. It was the loudest sound I've ever heard – then my father showed me how to cork a joint.

As I got older, my father would make me help him around the house when he fixed the plumbing. One day when I was about 15, he showed me how to sweat copper tubing. He pulled out a vice and some pipe and showed me that first you have to clean both sides of the joint (the pipe and the fitting). Then he showed me that you have to flux to clean the joint and then he showed me

the best part! My father pulled out the torch (which was only a map tank but still I was fascinated by it). He screwed the tip on it and lit it. When he lit it, it made the sound **BOOM**. Then it made a loud whistle. The sound was ear deafening. He pulled out a roll of solder and proceeded to sweat the joint. Then he said, "You try it." The first joint I ever did had to be the worst joint I ever did in my entire life.

I currently work for a plumbing company I've been with since I started my apprenticeship. They taught me a lot too. I've experienced a lot with them. I have been on all types of jobs from new construction to renovations. I've been in hospitals, condos, high-rises, etc.

Plumbers get a bad rap because people stereotype plumbers. They think we only clean out stopped up toilet bowls full of **POOP**, but plumbing is more than cleaning out the throne. Plumbing is the delivery of clean drinking water and the removal of soiled waste and matter. Plumbing is not all about the delivery and removal of water; it also is the delivery of medical gases such as oxygen, medical air, nitrogen, nitrous oxide and vacuums. So plumbing keeps people alive!

I started my apprenticeship in March 2007, and I have been enjoying every day of it. I wake up at 5 a.m., go to work and have a sense of accomplishment. My job gives me a feeling of pride and the thought that my work saved someone's life. My trade protects the health of the nation. I owe all of this to my father, Philip Parziale Sr. He is the biggest reason I became a plumber.

From the Outside Looking In
(Moments of Outsider-ness as an Apprentice)

The Outsider

Ray

I remember when I started at my company. It was a hot summer day, one of those days where you would rather be at the beach or at the pool and you swear you can see the devil on the corner eating a snow cone. I was sent to 250 West 57th St. to start my career as a plumber. Upon arrival, I met my foreman, Anthony. At first, I couldn't find him because it was a 25 story building and he was running around taking care of business.

I was on the second floor because as I was looking for him I found a gang box that had my company's name on it, so I stood by until someone came and I could find out where he was. I waited for about 15 minutes and sure enough my foreman showed up. I introduced myself: "Hi, my name is Ramon and I was told to come and see you. Today is my first day. Linda, the office manager, told me to come and with work you. She says you're a good person to learn from."

He tells me, "Welcome to plumbing. Do you have any experience in the field?"

"I have very little, but I'm a fast learner," I said.

"Good enough," he replied. "Give me a minute. I have to make a phone call."

While he was on the phone, I just looked around and waited for him to come back. When he returned he said, "Walk with me until you get the hang of things and we'll go from there." I spent the morning following him like a little, lost puppy looking for a place to fit in. He introduced me to the rest of the workers on the job and right away I felt funny. They all looked at me like I had the plague. Why? I didn't know. As the day went on, I approached my foreman and said, "Ant, why did the guys look at me like I stole something from them?"

"Don't pay attention to that," he said. "Every time some new guy starts they always feel like that. Don't take it personal."

Lunch time came around and we were all sitting in the shanty. The guys were all talking about the job we were on and also about past jobs. Being the new guy, I really had no input since this was my first jobsite. All the guys were laughing and getting along so well, but I was just sitting there soaking in the atmosphere and everything that they were saying. I felt like it was rude not to try to involve me in the conversation. At any point they could have taken the time to ask about me and get to know me, but they all just stood in their group.

After lunch was over, everyone went back to work and I went back to following my foreman around. It was my first day so I really didn't want to rock the boat, but I thought to myself: *If things don't change, I will have to say something tomorrow.* The afternoon went quickly and the end of the day was nearing when my foreman came over to me and wanted to know how I liked the job.

"It's my first day and I didn't really do anything except follow you around," I told him. "I would really like to learn more and do more work."

He told me, "Ray, don't worry. Once I see what you can do you will have more responsibility. Just give it some time."

"I guess that makes sense – but I also felt really uncomfortable since no one knows me and really didn't speak to me," I explained.

"It's like that with every new guy," he said. "It's almost time to go so head on out and I will see you here tomorrow at 7 a.m. Don't be late!"

"No problem. See you tomorrow."

The next morning, we all met in the shanty to get ready for the day's work. I was unlocking the ladders, and when I saw that everyone was there I said, "I just want to say that although I am new, I would like to be treated like everyone else. I hope we can all work together and get along." I expected somebody to say something, but there was silence – the kind of silence you would never expect to hear at a construction site. They all looked at me with a look that could only mean *who the f-ck is this guy?! Damn rookie!* After that, I just went about my business and did what Anthony told me to do.

It was about a week until the guys warmed up to me and started to include me in the conversations. I kept thinking to myself: *Why are they like this? What is it about me that made me an outcast and outsider?* I really didn't understand.

Now that I have been in the field for four years, I understand why they did it. There is an unwritten rule about when new guys start. At my company every time that a new guy starts they always assume that the new guy is a rat for the boss. So, everyone is really tight-lipped in front of the new person. They do not want to say or do anything that would get back to the boss. There are times when the guys take a long lunch, or they leave early and they don't know if they can trust the new person. It usually takes a while before they feel that they can trust the new guy enough to do these things in front of him. This is one of the few unwritten rules that exist in the field. I personally never treat anyone this way because I didn't like the way it felt when it was done to me. I treat everyone the way that I would like to be treated.

Feeling Like an Outsider in Plumbing

Mr. Christian

Most apprentices in Plumbers Local 1 tend to come in with absolutely no experience whatsoever, like myself. I guess most of us have had a time, or a few times, we can remember that we have felt as outsiders in our old or current shops. I have had a few times that I've felt as an outsider because of things being said or things being asked of me. All trades have key words for certain tools or equipment, and when you're new to the trade you truly try to comprehend or make sense of what's being asked but you can't because you are still learning how to walk and talk the way plumbers do. Only time can teach you the correct meaning or definitions to those words. We all have clear memories of certain times we felt as outsiders, and those memories will remain for good.

My first moment of feeling like an outsider (but definitely not my last time) must have been my second week of work. I remember it was the first day at this particular site with a new foreman and mechanic. I arrived about 25 minutes early to make a good impression but realized that the shop had never given me the foreman's phone number. After walking around for about 20 minutes and asking just about everyone there if they were plumbers or if they worked for my shop, I bumped into my foreman, and the first words out of his mouth were, "You're late!" I wanted to explain what had happened but thought to myself that it would be pointless. After the whole process of signing in and going to safety orientation, I saw that it was about 9 a.m. and everyone had stepped out to eat so I figured the worst was over.

After break, I started to speak to my new foreman and remember him asking me questions that sounded like he was speaking a different language, like if I were familiar with certain tools and what I have worked with before. About ten questions of my not being able to say, "Yes, I have done that," he looked at me and said, "You're as green as they come." He stepped out of the shanty for a few minutes leaving me alone and came back with a black and red bucket and told me, "You'll start doing this." I was in some way happy I had something to do because that day was just dragging and then realized that all I would be doing is fire stopping.

Lunch crept by and we all stepped out to eat; sitting down with four guys I never met before made me feel like such an outsider, as if I just didn't belong there. I remember feeling that way the first day of school, the first day of camp, but never with a job. All they were talking about was plumbing and fittings that were needed. After a few days of getting to know the guys, things just started to fall into place and things began to seem better. I was taken off the fire stop list and began to work with a mechanic. It was a feeling of belonging, but I always had that thought in the back of my head that I would always be the outsider in a new site with new people.

The feeling of being an outsider to me wasn't for a minute or for a day; it was for about a week. Everyone who starts a new career and is not being able to distinguish what is what will feel as an outsider. There were a few days that I would get home after work and sit to think if I had made the correct decision; I wanted to know if I was cut out for this line of business. I guess those few days of feeling like an outsider made me doubt what I wanted to do. My foreman and I were swapped to different sites after that one and I never felt as an outsider just because I knew at least one guy there. Everyone can remember a time when they were new and felt like the outsider. It's not a nice feeling but once you realize that it's just a feeling and that it doesn't last, you're okay. Till this day, if I work with a new mechanic, I feel like an outsider, just because you learn to do things different ways and they expect you to know their ways.

Character Makes a Person, Not Appearances

William Senko

Let me start this essay by saying that there has always been a time in my life where I've felt like an outsider. I believe that anything I do for the first time, whether it's school, sports, job, etc., I always come off as odd to people. To say that my first few months on the job were any different would be far fetched. So yes, being an outsider is what I do best.

I'm going to describe how I looked when I first started being a plumber, just so you can get the same impression of me as everyone else did. To be blunt and honest about myself: I looked like a crazy, long-hair hippie with no direction in life. That's the assumption I believe I gave off to other people. My hair was very long – but not straight, long hair; it was curly and frizzy long, which made it look very wild. I had a soul patch that went down to the bottom of my chin (which I still have today). If I chose not to shave for a week or two, let's just say it didn't help the hippie look. Bam! What a first impression, right? I didn't see it that way. It is who I am.

At the union school where I met my fellow apprentices, I don't believe I stood out as much nor did I care if I did because I wasn't going to end up working with most of them on a daily basis. Now the shop I was assigned to is a completely different story. I chose a Staten Island shop due to the fact that it's where I live and I wouldn't have to travel to the city everyday. That was the positive part of choosing Staten Island. The negative part is that on Staten Island, people who look like me are not a dime a dozen. I was pretty confident my shop was no different, and I was right.

The first day I walked into my shop, I felt like my own personal freak show. Everyone in the shop was staring at me like I just walked right out of a 1960s time machine. The people in my shop were just what I expected: all clean-cut, clean hair or shaved heads and everything I wasn't. To top standing out like a sore thumb, the guy they had me working with my first two months couldn't be more my opposite. He was bald, had tons of tattoos and hated rock 'n' roll music. What a joy that was. Let's just say it wasn't a pleasant first impression that plumbing had on me. A little ironic, or at least I thought so anyway.

After I'd been working as a plumber for a month, I was still looking the same and working with the same guy. Since I looked the same and rarely talked to anyone, I believe people in my shop still viewed me the same. I really didn't like to take care of my hair; I just liked to let it go wild, but since I started plumbing it was forcing me to take care of it. I couldn't take it anymore (yes, I'm lazy), so I cut all my hair off. It wasn't the easiest decision to make, but it was necessary; however it helped my situation with some people. I also realized that with some people they are just miserable and make you feel like an outsider because that's how they feel.

Finally, I was no longer working with the angry tattoo man anymore, and I was being moved around to other mechanics in the shops. They were letting me know what they thought of me, explaining, "When you first walked into the shop we never gave you a shot in hell to make it, but now you're not that bad. Let me show you the ropes." Now, they never told me exactly why they felt that way, but how many times in life are you judged by your appearance and not your character? Why was it that when I first walked into the shop I didn't have a shot in hell compared to the next person? To me, it was my appearance that made people feel that way. I hope I'm wrong about that and it was just due to my being the new guy. I'll say this much, they really didn't make me feel like that was the case, but life goes on

I've been working in this shop now for one year and counting. It turned out that my character in life was very similar to many of the guys' in the shop. I've been getting along with everyone really well, and I hope to never get laid off from this shop because getting along with people means they like you and are willing to teach you because they want you to succeed. My learning experience in plumbing has been great thanks to the guys I've been working with.

This is what I've learned from being judged as an outsider most of my life: that when it's all said and done, it's the character of the person that makes a person – not their appearance.

Examining Difference

Christopher Tavarez

Plumbers Local 1 is a union in which its members share a brotherhood that really stands out. I mean there are men who have known each other for the better part of 30 years or more. They've been through it all, if you will. Fathers have their sons and their grandsons working alongside each other. It is a way of life and thinking. There are certain lingo's that are spoken that other lifestyles wouldn't understand. There also was a time where I didn't understand things well so I didn't fit in right away, I felt left out.

When I first started in this union, I was quiet and I didn't really talk much. I still felt shy and out of place. I didn't know too much about the business other than the things they taught in my vocational school. Guys would joke around and I didn't get it so they looked at me like I was lost. I always was the type of person who didn't care what people thought about me. I wasn't going to kiss anyone's ass to fit in. I sure as hell wasn't going to do it there.

There were times when I would mess up the coffee orders. Some of my co-workers would get mad because of the fact that I hadn't given them their food the way they wanted it. Then I would feel more and more out place. I didn't fit in so I didn't feel good and I would go to work mad. My head wouldn't be in the right place. I wouldn't focus on what I was doing so I would mess up a lot.

One day, I just told myself that I wasn't going to let any of these guys get to me, so I just focused more at work. I would make sure that I would get the coffee orders right and start to focus more on what my mechanics would tell me to do. Then after I started to do that, little by little things just started to click. I could remember one day when there was a delivery coming at 6 o'clock in the morning. I made sure that I was there early so I could prepare the pipe cart so we could take it in. It just so happened that my foreman and mechanic were running late and the truck was there already so I decided to unload it myself. Five minutes later they showed up and were impressed. My mechanic let me know, too. Then later on my foreman thanked me for being prepared for the delivery and apologized for being late.

That's when I realized you just have to be yourself. That's what it's all about. You have to be willing to sacrifice for your team and your brothers. You have to have their backs. You have to look out for them because these are the guys

you are going to be working with for years to come. If you show them that you don't care about them, they won't care about you. That's when I realized the brotherhood of this union. We have to treat each other with respect. That's when others treat you with respect, that's when they start showing you the trade which, in all, is what you are trying to learn, right? It's funny when I think about it because it's like you and your brother at home: there are going to be ups and downs; however you learn from those experiences, and the fact that you still have each others' back afterwards. That's the importance of being in the union. For anyone who comes into the union if they follow that one rule they will fit in fine!

Women in the Trades

**(Or, "Anything you can do, I can do better" –
or at least just as good)**

The Unexpected Plumber

Jennifer Singleton

A plumber has to expose themselves to dangerous conditions and locations. Underground work, basements, ceilings, abandoned shafts, tunnels, bridges and everywhere else plumbing/piping can be beneficial to our quality of life. Plumbers have to work in all elements as well: sunshine, rain, snow and cold winds. The system also is difficult to learn – the various types of pipe and what they can and can't be used for. The plumbing fixture installation and repair also must be learned; math, too, in order to be able to use distance formulas and figure the area and volume between two or more piping systems and make sure your connections are accurate. There's a lot of knowledge necessary to become a great plumber. The amount of knowledge leaves me with the question: *Can anyone become a plumber?*

Plumbers also are supposed to be physically strong to be able to lift heavy items and transport them where they need to be, walking up ladders and going up and down stairs all while carrying pipe or other piping materials. Many people think that all the tasks and knowledge, as well as the tolerance of the elements and dangerous conditions, can only be accomplished by a man. A male plumber. However, I feel that women can be great plumbers with equal or better skills than male plumbers. There have been women who have led successful careers as plumbers. A female on a construction job usually gets surprised glances from men of all trades. A female carrying plumbing material is just unexpected.

Many women in construction are thought to be weak because they are females. Women are often asked to do "women's" tasks. These tasks are considered light work and easy. Other men on the job often resent women because of this and this makes it harder for women to gain respect from their male co-workers. As a female, "women's" tasks were assigned to me when I first started plumbing. I quickly informed my foreman that I was capable of performing the jobs of my co-workers and by speaking up, I was allowed to do the same work as the men on the job. Although the foreman thought he was being helpful to me, in the beginning, the light duty was discouraging.

As a female plumber apprentice, I have learned more quickly than the male apprentices I work with. This is important because, unlike the male apprentices, I have a point to prove, my point being that gender doesn't stop

or limit my work performance. There have been times when I felt that as a female I couldn't perform a task, like drilling in the ceiling. Drilling in ceilings is my least favorite part of being a plumber because my arms get tired. At first, I thought it was because I was weaker than the men I was working with, but I found out that I was just doing it wrong and it had nothing to do with my being a woman.

There is a lot of discrimination that female construction workers face: limited job assignments, sexual discrimination, not being offered overtime and having to work certain jobsites to fulfill quota requirements. These are all gender biases that discourage women from working in the labor trades. There have been stories of an experienced tradeswoman not being sent to a jobsite to work overtime because the foreman on the site didn't want to work with a female. This also was an act of gender discrimination because the woman could perform the same task as her male co-workers, but she wasn't given the opportunity because of her gender.

Many women are sexually discriminated against because some men feel that women on the jobsite can distract the "good" men workers from performing their jobs. The idea is that the men will concentrate on pursuing outside personal relationships with women on the job. Then there are the men who are cautious to talk to women because they fear their interactions with women on the job could end in sexual harassment lawsuits.

The many obstacles that women face based on their gender, however, haven't stopped women from joining construction trades or the labor force. There are many encouraging aspects of being a female tradesperson. The feeling of accomplishment is what makes me want to continue to be a plumber while I get to perform the same work as the male plumbers. Making the same money as men, the opportunity to do the same work as men, and all the benefits included in being a union tradesperson all inspire women to join the construction trades.

Gender Roles in Relation to the Labor Trades

Dustin Haskell

Behavioral norms, or gender roles, are a given society's expectations for their men and women. Men are expected to be capable of performing certain jobs, having a certain attitude, even speaking a certain way, whereas women are generally expected to perform the counter or opposite in that given community. Gender roles are often long established norms that are typically accepted by both sexes. Even in more "advanced" cultures there are still, and likely always will be, lines drawn between men and women beyond their physical characteristics. These lines may become blurred or moved, but due to an inability of both men and women to simply accept the fact that each are fully capable of performing one another's expected roles, no matter how advanced a culture may become, there will likely be gender division in both ideology and the workplace. One of the effects of these expectations is to put a stigma on women working in the labor trades, as it is a field generally dominated by men.

For many men the thought of working with a woman on a construction project becomes one of a few things. One of these possible outcomes is that the man feels disgusted, degraded or emasculated. Men tend to think that if a woman joins their job they are essentially being told that "Suzy Homemaker" can haul cinder blocks, put up steel beams, or install cast iron pipe just as well as they can. This can put men on edge as they feel as though they are being told that someone weaker than them can do their job. A statement like this in our society can be bruising to a man's ego. If a 250 pound, 6-foot tall man is told that a 5-foot-6-inch, 135 pound woman can do his job, he feels as though he is being told that his strength counts for nothing. He can become bitter and resentful even though the woman may not even be doing any of the work that his strength is required for. This could lead to a woman on the job being ignored or treated unfairly. The men on the job may try to force her to do things that they know any one of them are capable of, while they are fully aware that she cannot perform the same task.

Men may make fun of the woman when she fails to perform in an effort to demoralize her and force her off the job. They may assign her a position that they know she can't handle so the boss will fire her. Practical jokes could become commonplace and an overall hostile work environment is developed.

The woman can feel inferior because of these actions. It is unfair treatment due to the simple fact that the woman is merely trying to make a living. The fact that it is outside the “norm” is the only valid explanation for the men’s actions. It is that stigma against women in the labor industry that causes the problem, not her actual capabilities.

Another possible reaction of men being put on a job with a woman is that they see it as a provocative or sexually charged situation. They look at a woman on the job as a potential sexual conquest. They can become distracted by these thoughts, cutting down on production. There also is the potential for sexual harassment lawsuits due to some men’s inability to keep certain comments to themselves. Men can become resentful of this situation because when it is just the guys they can say whatever they want with very little fear of offending anyone. There also is the potential for a mutual relationship to be developed, whether it be strictly sexual or one with more meaning. While this may be okay at first, the moment a problem with the relationship develops it can cause tension and reduced production in the workplace. This is an unfortunate but rather commonplace situation. It can be seen in all forms of work, not just in the labor industry.

A third and equally harmful potential outcome is the feeling that the woman uses sex to advance her position. A woman could be very intelligent and good at her job, but when she is promoted men may talk about her saying that she only advanced because she was sleeping with the boss. A man might feel threatened by an even remotely attractive woman on his job because of this possibility. He may have been working hard towards a promotion and fails to get it in favor of the woman. It could be blamed on affirmative action, using sex, or any number of other reasons. It couldn’t possibly be because the woman was the better candidate for the job.

On the other side of things, women may shy away from labor positions on their own. It could be from fear of any of the above situations, but also may be caused by the gender roles they were raised with. Many young women are taught from an early age that “men do the heavy lifting” and women do other work. While they may no longer be told that a woman’s place is in the home, they are rarely told to go out and be a plumber, ironworker or carpenter. Many times they are told that they “can be anything they want to be” but the underlying theme behind that statement is that they can be what they want to be as long as it’s a “feminine” job. Whether it be a secretary, a nurse, a teacher, or any number of other “female” jobs, they are rarely encouraged to join the “men’s side of the house.” Again, this is nothing more than a

commonly accepted normality. However, it does leave a lasting impression. Many women spend their whole lives believing in the idea that men do labor intensive jobs and women do “thinking” jobs.

These thoughts lead to other baseless ideologies. Some of these include the idea that women are more intelligent than men, or that men cannot be compassionate. Each one of the ideas are wrong. However, each one of them is common in all areas of the United States. These ideas should be extinguished, but it seems an impossible task. As long as there are two sexes there will be gender roles. As long as there are gender roles women will, to at least some degree, be discouraged from joining the labor force.

Female Plumbers in the Field

Frank Belfiore

I feel women can be just as good, if not better, than men at plumbing. They are very intelligent and can retain information well. They are mostly smaller and can fit into tighter areas and spaces than men. And, some women pay greater attention to detail versus men, as opposed to in the article “Female Plumbers” (1885) from *The New York Times*.

Most of my life, I have had the privilege of being around intelligent women. My mother is a very smart woman. She is an associate for a major home improvement company and often deals with contractors by betting up orders, putting together price quotes, and, if they happen to run into problems, she is the go-to person with the solution. Unlike the article which states that women have “more imagination” than men and so cannot correctly add numbers, it is my mother’s occupation to do such a thing. She is educated on many things that on occasion she has to educate a contractor. She is great at problem solving and math, and she does not mind getting her hands dirty. I am positive she would be an amazing plumber if she chose to do so.

Physically, most women are built with a smaller frame than men. They have smaller hands and are generally thinner than men. So, say there is a tight space in a ceiling between a duct and some pipes; many men would not be able to fit in order to get the job completed correctly. But a woman would. She could squeeze in and get to those tight spaces to make sure that the job is done completely and correctly. Also, say there is a small hole and a tool or piece of material fell into it. A man would not be able to fit his big hands in there so there is another matter in which a woman would be more capable of doing in the field. Her small hands would be great for circumstances like that.

My fiancée, like more women I know, is a perfectionist. She pays close attention to details and always worries about her safety. According to the *Times* article, a woman in “the matter of ‘wiping a joint’ or of soldering a faucet ... would burn her fingers and set the house on fire with greater ease than a man.” My fiancée though is always worried about her safety, whether it is at work or driving, or doing everyday tasks; she’s always making sure things are done in a safe manner. Also, working in a receiving department can be very dangerous because she constantly deals with heavy items and hazardous materials so she needs to follow many safety steps so she doesn’t

get injured. She is always making sure things get done correctly. She also deals with a lot of return items and damaged goods so she always has to make sure to get the right prices for the right items; she can't raise the prices on anything. So, when writing out a bill she would always make sure the charges are correct and not inflated in any way. These also are good reasons that a woman could be a great plumber.

I see men on the job who don't care to pay attention to detail. They are constantly getting injured doing the job incorrectly. They don't care as much about safety as a woman does. In most cases as well, they like the thought of the extra money so they often inflate a bill to make more profit. This is proof that men are not always a suitable person for the job. Some people care only about themselves.

Some may still argue today that women could not do as great a job at plumbing as men, but I would have to disagree. They are more than capable of doing a good job at anything a man can do. They just need to be given the opportunity. Everyday we're seeing more women in the construction field, and I think it's a great thing. It shows that the union can be diversified and can accept differences more and more. It may have taken us over a hundred years to do so, but we're getting there.

Gender Norms and Women in the Plumbing Trade

A. Levinson

There are many behavioral norms that are associated with women. They are expected to cook and clean. They are expected to do the laundry and, of course, take care of the children – make them breakfast, get them ready for school and take them to school. After completing their errands, women shall then pick the children up from school and help them with their homework. When homework is finished, the woman prepares dinner for the family, gives the children a bath and puts them to bed.

Women are supposed to be neat, look clean at all times and have manicured nails. They should speak softly and never use foul language. They should never listen to, let alone tell, a dirty joke. If they work – which they shouldn't because they should be home ironing – they should be librarians or teachers. They shouldn't be doing any hard manual labor.

Society has placed these gender roles on us. I am a man so it wouldn't be "normal" according to society for me to give manicures. If you are a female, society says you "shouldn't" be a plumber because it's "a man's job." These ridiculous norms discourage women from pursuing work in labor trades such as plumbing. Women are discouraged for many reasons such as the fear of what people might say or think about them.

A female plumber? The first question everyone asks is: "Is she gay?" People ask that because plumbing is not the "traditional" job for a woman. So what if she is gay? Though, by the way, she probably isn't. I worked with a female plumber named Tasha. She told me that people always assumed that she was gay because she was a plumber. Tasha always said people told her that she was doing the job of a man and that a female should take on a job for women. What I asked her what she thought was a good job for a woman, she told me that both she and her husband (See, she wasn't gay!) thought plumbing was a great job.

Men usually ask the following questions about female plumbers: How is she going to lift that pipe if it weighs more than she does; *Why does that woman have filthy nails; Where did she work today, in a sewer; Couldn't she find another job that was more appropriate for a woman?* Women also

are discouraged because they feel that the men on the jobs won't take them seriously. They feel that they are going to have to work so much harder on the same job just to prove themselves. Men are known to be strong and these women feel that they have to prove that they are just as strong and can lift just as much, if not more. Women also are discouraged because of the discrimination they will most likely face once on the job.

For example, when I was on a job in Staten Island last year, they told us a new journeyman was coming. I was there with a bunch of guys and then one rainy morning, this lady showed up. We were all like, "Who is she?" So, one guy asked her if she was there to clean the floors. Before she was able to answer the question, another guy asked her if she was going to take breakfast orders. I just stood there in awe. I didn't know who she was, but I knew she was a woman. Finally, she said, "My name is Nancy. I'm going to be the new journeyman on this site."

The guys all laughed and yelled, "You must be shittin' me!" One guy said, "I know that you're here to bust chops. Who sent you?" Finally, I told the guys to cool it. Much to my dismay, they made fun of me for telling them to calm down. Although Nancy thanked me, the guys tortured her all day and taunted her for being a female plumber – even though she was very experienced, having 19 years on the job. She probably knew a lot more than some of those guys too!

This was just one site with rude guys. Most guys are respectful and leave the locker room talk for when a lady leaves. There are many women who are laughed at and bullied. Some old-timers have the notion that when a woman arrives on site, she will pick up the coffee, just like the Staten Island job. There are women who really want to be treated like a lady on the job. They want the men to carry the heavy pipes for them and do all the lifting and they will just do the light stuff. These women expect the foul language to stay behind and doors to be opened by the men on the job.

On the other hand, there are many women who just want to enjoy going to work. I found that also to be proven in the essay "A Point to Be Proven" by Candice Wagner in Lights On. In this essay, there was a female apprentice named Julianne who said that she doesn't mind listening to a dirty joke every now and then. She didn't want the shanty to become silent every time she walked in; she wanted to be part of the shanty – part of the crew. Many women are discouraged because they don't feel like they will ever be part of the "brotherhood."

I also have worked with many women who told me that they had been interested in nontraditional jobs when they were younger but were discouraged by teachers and family. They were told it just wasn't work for a lady. They were told to become teachers or secretaries. One woman told me that her mom actually told her to become a dental hygienist because it was a job for a woman.

The saddest part of this whole gender game is that the women who do go into the nontraditional role, such as plumbing, really do put their all into it. The union could benefit from these laborers. Unfortunately, society is society and that's why Local 1 is always referred to as a *brotherhood* and not as a *brother and sisterhood*.

The Intelligent Plumber

(Or, Why there's more brain than brawn in plumbing)

I.Q.

Rashaad Cochran

To be a good plumber you need to be an intelligent individual. The work that the occupation entails isn't always as simple as popular belief. In fact, most of the work takes specific comprehension skills not commonly possessed. Intelligence is the ability to comprehend or understand something. For example, if you're able to perform a feat efficiently and successfully you can say you are educated on that particular function. Intelligence is an overall generalization to describe a highly competent person. With the plumbing profession aside, plumbers are still individuals at the end of the day. To judge a group of individuals, all with separate backgrounds and levels of education, is an idiotic generalization.

On a daily basis a plumber uses his or her intelligence regularly throughout the duration of the workday: from the knowledge of operating around or through complicated jobsite obstacles that arise periodically and unexpectedly, to communicating with diverse ethnic background job coordinators. A person who lacks a high level understanding of math couldn't diagnose, create and solve massive math equations that frequently occur in a day's work. From pitches on pipe and degrees of elevation in trenching where the work must be placed, plumbers would have a very difficult time performing such tasks without a high level of intelligence.

Some plumbers also have received high levels of education in or after high school graduation. Personally, I have participated in honors courses in high school. One of the most basic of requirements for Local 1 is that all plumbers must have at least graduated from high school or received their GED. In fact you would find that a good percentage of plumbers attended college and chose not to continue, or were accepted to college post high school and opted for union work. The reason for not continuing a college career isn't that they couldn't keep up with the work or not do the work required of them. The motive is usually things such as personal reasons, financial woes, or not wanting to attend college immediately following high school. Many plumbers have gone on to continue their college education after a few years in the trade. In Local 1, if you are an apprentice who hasn't received any college education it is mandatory for you to take several college classes.

Another way to gauge intelligence is the ability of a person to communicate with others. The process of conveying important information detrimental to the job's progress is imperative. Plumbers need to understand several types of speaking manners or lingo. Being fluent in the many lingo or popular abbreviations saves time and takes skill. Speaking and understanding someone or something else is a wide field. Beyond lingo there are times for formal speaking, hand signs and blueprint readings. The overall social ability of a plumber has to be at a very high level before he or she can even begin to work. The intelligence that is required to effectively communicate with other trades and workers isn't one that is held by just anyone.

I find the most convincing argument to illustrate a plumber's intelligence is the workers who don't have the best plumbing skills – the worker who is, at best, average at his job, and who doesn't excel at any one facet of the trade whatsoever. In my experience with a large percentage of these rare plumbers, I found that though they may not be the best skilled plumber, as an overall individual they are some of the most well-rounded people you will ever meet. Educated on the vastest subjects you could ever imagine, the average plumber is usually an intelligent and cultured individual. The problem arises when people generalize people according to the professions they hold. Most are educated about what it takes to do a job like plumbing, but a lot of people may look at the profession and decide that it is a simple job that doesn't require much mental ability, just high levels of physical labor.

It is without question that plumbers are intelligent. The math skills and problem solving they encounter is rigorous. The high percentages of plumbers who have several different types of extended educations illustrates their mental competence. The communication and comprehension of slang, technical hand signaling and blueprint reading are a strong examples. The overall social ability that the job requires is not a common trait. Plumbers are intelligent due to all the skills that their career demands from them.

Are Plumbers Intelligent? Is the Sky Blue?

Thomas Cassano

When most people think of intelligence they immediately connect that with attending highly overpriced Ivy League schools, or having the initials “Dr.” slapped in front of a name. Intelligence is really just the ability to obtain information and be able to retain what you have learned and use it in your everyday life. I hear people say that any moron can be a plumber, but this is the most naïve and thick headed statement someone can make. If you’re going to ask “Are plumbers intelligent?” you may as well ask if the sky is blue, or if dogs bark, because the true answer is blatantly obvious when you see the work we do. Plumbers are intelligent because we go through an incredibly difficult five-year training program taught by professionals who have mastered the trade.

Plumbers protect the health of our nation with just our bare hands. Do you think anyone off the street could accomplish that? A foreman on a job has the skills to run a job with 40-50 guys and understands every single aspect of the plumbing inside a 60 story building. You would think that would require a slight bit of intelligence. Being a plumber requires great skill, a lot of hard work and vigorous training to become a master of the trade.

To become a mechanic and have your full plumbing license, you must go through a five-year training program that covers every aspect of the plumbing industry there is. Over a five-year period, you will take a mandatory 35 courses and have the option to take a hundred more. Every class is taken very seriously and you must meet every UA standard that is set for the class or you will be unable to move on to the next course. If you just happen to fail the course, you are given one more opportunity and if it is failed a second time you are terminated. In addition to the requirements of passing every course, to become a mechanic you have to accumulate a minimum of 8,000 work hours and get either an associate degree in science or Auto-CAD or get a welding certification. Absolutely nothing about this process is simple nor is it something that doesn’t require a great deal of work and intelligence. I’m told the percentage of students from each class who actually make it through the program without failing one class is about 25 percent. This is not due to people’s lack of intelligence; this all has to do with how difficult it is and how serious the courses are taken. This may not be some \$50,000 a year school, but we get the same if not better education than most college students.

For those who don't realize how important plumbing is to a fully functional society, you should know that a plague that killed one-third of a nation had a direct connection with the fact that people were unable to dispose of human waste and fecal matter properly. The advancement in plumbing over the course of the past century has been monumentally influential to the world we live in today. Every week, the plumbing industry comes out with new and improved technology to help the safety and health of communities all over the world. No one ever realizes that *traps* (the "P" shaped chrome things under sinks) save the lives of families by not allowing toxic gasses to flow into the air supply of a home. All that copper that you see in the ceiling of your house is because of plumbers finding out that lead-based joints to run water lines were making people sick due to the lead content in water. Every day there are things around you that plumbers have installed and which help you live a worry-free and healthy lifestyle.

When a job begins, a foreman is put there by the company and the foreman is basically the boss of the job and runs all onsite work. A foreman is usually a highly intelligent person with great leadership qualities who understands plumbing better than anyone else on the job. You have to be incredibly skilled in your trade to be a foreman, and to have knowledge of just about every aspect that plumbing entails. A person with no intelligence would never have the ability to run a job, especially ones that sometimes require upwards of 50 plumbers at a time. S/he has to have full knowledge of the New York City plumbing code, which contains a few thousand rules and regulations, each one giving specific detailed instructions of what guidelines need to be followed in order to install different parts of a plumbing system. No matter what type of work the people do, the boss is never an uneducated person. And it is no different when it comes to plumbing; s/he is always a very educated employee who knows everything there is to know about the industry and job.

Albert Einstein, someone who is still considered one of the greatest minds in history, once said, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd be a plumber." Some may find that to be very insignificant, but I, on the other hand, think differently. He knew even back then how essential and important plumbing was to everyday life. It's not as simple as taking some pipe and slapping glue in between and boom you can carry water. Science, math and physics are all involved in plumbing. It takes very skilled and intelligent men and women to be able to perform the work that we plumbers can do.

The Intelligence of Plumbing

Jimmy Torres

This essay will be on why I think plumbers are intelligent. I will give examples on what plumbers do at work and certain things they build and ideas they have at work that make their jobs easier. To be a plumber you have to be at least mechanically inclined and be smart enough to figure things out when a job goes wrong. If plumbing was so easy then everyone would be a plumber.

There are times that a plumber will do a job that they have done plenty of times and while they are doing the job something unexpected will happen. For example, if you were backing out a corroded piece of threaded pipe, sometimes the pipe will start crumpling as you put the wrench on it, when this happens you will have to check the fitting to see if there are pipe threads stuck in the fitting and if so you will have to cape it out with a hammer and chisel. This is one of the many examples that can go wrong and prolong the job. Keep in mind that there are many fields of plumbing. Ruffing is one of them, repiping is another, finish work and much more, and in each one of these fields there is a trick to the trade. Have you ever heard of that expression? It means each one of these trades has a trick that makes the job easier or faster. The reason for these tricks is to not kill your body and to make the job easier.

Plumbers figure out ways to get the job done. It isn't easy to be a plumber; sometimes things do not work out or go the way it was planned to go. Another example is installing a sink, you have to lie on your back and hold the sink up while you insert the screws and clips that will hold the sink. One of the plumbers at work invented a bracket that holds up the sink while you install the screws and clips. This bracket is made of wood, rod, nuts and washers. This simple invention can be made with materials that you can find on the job. This invention has helped so much. There is no strain on your arms. You are not worried about the sink falling on your face and it makes the process of installing a sink a lot easier and faster. Making this bracket was one of the best things this plumber could have invented. This is not something they sell. It is just an invention a plumber at work thought of to make his job easier. This is one of the many intelligent things plumbers do.

I know most people look at plumbers, or any tradespersons, like they are not intelligent because they work with their hands and not their minds. But this is not true; everyday we use our minds. The truth is everyone is intelligent in their own way. If I was to take a business man from Wall Street who is not good with his hands and tell him to install a tub or dress a sink or even to solder something, how intelligent will he be then? Some plumbers are great at what they do but if you put them to do something else they may not be good at it, but this goes for everyone. The word intelligent is deceiving. Just because a plumber doesn't speak as sophisticatedly as someone who works on Wall Street doesn't mean they are not as intelligent. As a plumber, all you do is think and plan all day on how you are going to do the job; you have to order the right material and if you run into any problems, think of a way to fix it.

Just to speak off experience, I feel like my foreman and I are intelligent plumbers, because we do finish work and we have to drill accessories like towel bars and toilet paper holders into glass tiles. Now you hear glass and you immediately think sensitive or fragile, but no way, these glass tiles are some tough puppies. Trying to drill into these tiles with a Dewalt drill and glass tile bits is hard. We have to figure out a way to feed constant water to the particular spot that we are drilling, so we rigged water supply on the drill with a valve to open and close the water while we drill. Drilling without water will immediately burn out the glass bit, but with the constant feed of water drilling into glass tiles was a success. This is intelligent because no one was able to figure out a way to drill through these glass tiles without burning so many bits.

I have given many reasons why plumbers are intelligent; I feel that plumbers are one of the hardest working trades, our trade is physical and challenging. Not only that but being a plumber gives you a good feeling that you are supplying clean domestic water and sanitary bathrooms. Just doing construction, period, we build historical things and buildings that are going to be up for a hundred years or more. Just knowing that is mind blowing; also knowing that I am contributing in helping the world to be a better place is good enough for me.

The Unclogger

Michael Coluccio

It has always been part of the human condition to want to create superheroes. When something goes wrong, people look for someone to help them fix the problem and clean up the mess. In a lot of ways, many professionals are like superheroes. Each time a doctor saves a life, or a lawyer wins a case, or, to a lesser degree, when a plumber stops the water level from rising inside someone's home, we tap into our superpowers. We save the day. Then we leave so that the average people can return to their normal lives. Each job I complete, if I know I did it to the best of my ability, allows me to feel like a superhero. Each job I do well also teaches me more about my profession. Everyday I learn something is a "super" day.

There are many kinds of superpowers, and just as many superheroes who wield them. Batman used technology to fight crime. Superman's ability to harness the power of the yellow sun gave him the ability to fly, to see through walls and to stop speeding bullets with his bare hands. Wonder Woman commanded the secrets of the Amazon to force her captives to tell the truth. Finally, Aquaman controlled the sea and all its creatures. As a plumber, to have some kind of power over water seems like the best superpower of all.

I think I would like to have the type of power Poseidon has over water. I could suggest to the water that its pressure wasn't strong enough for the homeowner, and that it should increase. With one thought, the homeowner would have greater pressure in their shower. I could unclog a pipe without having to whip out my snake. I could build up the pressure of a water spout and send the spout racing to the clog. The spout would break up the clog (chemical free) and restore function to the drain.

I could identify a leak without breaking a wall. I would use the power of the water to feel where the leak is. I could use the energy of the water to send a patch to the site of the leak and with one thought the leak would be fixed. Instead of turning off the water in the house or building, I could command the water not to flow to the particular pipes I would be working on. I could demolish, renovate and change fixtures without having to inconvenience other people in the house. While I'm working on my job, people could wash dishes, do laundry, use the facilities in the house and not ask me when I'm going to turn the water back on.

Obviously controlling water is a superpower that could benefit both the home owner and the plumber. I could use water to carry my tools to the job. Harnessing the humidity in the air, I could collect water and use it to move heavy objects. I also could use my power over water to assist me in jobs where I may need a second hand. I could form water into many different shapes. If I needed a ½ inch ratchet and it was in the truck, I would send a stream of water to the truck – or I would command the water to form a ½ inch ratchet so I would not have to leave the jobsite. I could use the power of the water as torque to loosen the tight fittings and complete my job without spending extra time looking for the right tool.

I still believe that what makes a person a superhero is integrity and a job well done. I think any person who stands behind the job they perform is a superhero, and that special powers should not define a super being. The actions of one person can be super, and should be celebrated as such, but it is nice to fantasize. The superhero I want to be has integrity, honesty and does a great job the first time but also can command the power of water. The superhero I want to be can install fixtures with one hand while counting his money with the other. The superhero I want to be can find a leak by feeling where the water is draining. The superhero I want to be doesn't have to break open random walls to find a leak. The superhero I want to be can unclog a drain with the power of his mind. The superhero I want to be is **The Unclogger**.

Water Flows Downhill

(and other lessons from the job)

Mistakes Learned From = Lessons

Steven Scott

In life, there are many obstacles to overcome, one being a new apprentice. Being a good apprentice is not just getting coffee and taking deliveries; it also is asking why things are done and how. A few good lessons I have learned came from either using a tool, putting in a piece of pipe, using a certain formula to make measurements or even a communication lesson. On the job, there are many lessons you can learn, one being through making a mistake or learning by observation. In the construction field, there is always something new to learn.

A great lesson I learned from plumbing is when I was first asked to measure a piece of pipe and I did not have my stuck ruler or a writing utensil. I was working on a job in Queens with my foreman, Eric, doing renovations and sorting out fittings when he asked me to go one floor below him and measure from the floor up to the center mark, and I realized I had no stick ruler or tape measure on me. In a frantic way, I looked around for one on the floor somewhere and eventually found a steamfitter and asked if I could borrow his for a moment.

As I was running around, my foreman was getting irritated with the length of time this was taking me. I kept making excuses like, “One second Eric. I am just moving stuff out of the way.” Eventually, I got the center marked and yelled it up to him. I was relieved that I got that over with and he would not find out I was unprepared on the jobsite.

But sure enough, an hour later he goes to me, “Ok, I want you to go down to the basement and there are a few pieces of pipe I want you to measure and write them down on a piece of paper and bring it back up to me.” At this point, I thought *alright, no problem. I will just find someone else’s tape measure and he will never know a thing.* Well, I get down to the basement, see the pieces of pipe, then begin to look around and, yet again, I got lucky! I found an electrician and asked him for his tape, and he says no problem. So, I get to the pipe, start measuring, and then realizing I have no pencil or paper. Thinking quickly, I grab a piece of sheetrock edge and write them down on a piece of stray paper, fold it up, put it in my pocket and go back upstairs. When I finally get back up, I unfold the paper and realize all my writing has disappeared.

My foreman nonetheless was not happy at all and he started yelling at me saying, “If you had no pencil you should’ve asked – and why didn’t you bring one in?” He then realized I had no tape either and said, “How were you getting these measurements?” I told him how and he started ranting again about being prepared. The lesson here to be learned is to always come to work prepared with a stick ruler and pencil of some sort because if you don’t you might be in a scenario like this and may not get as lucky as me for this long. All I know is that after that I rarely ever forgot my stick or pencil for work.

Another great lesson I learned from plumbing came when I first started. My mechanic, Steve, brought out this tool with a long chain on it that looked like a pair of scissors. He explained to me that it was called a “snap cutter” and was used to cut cast iron pipe. He then went into another room and told me he would yell up measurements from the bottom floor and have me cut them, but I did not think to ask him to show me how to use the snap cutter. I wanted to seem as though I knew things already.

Steve goes downstairs and yells up measurements: “68 inches, end to end. 43 1/2 , end to end.” As he’s yelling them up, I was writing them down with a piece of pencil. He yells out the final measurements and says he will be back in about an hour because he has to take care of some other things and to just cut the pieces he told me to cut. I begin to try and cut the pieces and I realize this freaking tool is a lot harder to use than I thought. First, I can’t set it to the right size and the chain is too long or then it’s too short. I’m fighting with this thing and it feels like forever has gone by. I look at my phone and realize I’ve only been fighting with it for about 15 minutes. I know my mechanic isn’t around because he told me he would be back in an hour so I had to try and do this myself.

An hour passes and my mechanic comes back and sees that I’ve gotten no pipe cut at all. He probably would’ve been really mad if he didn’t see me sweating like crazy with oil all over me from the chain. He just laughed and said, “You should’ve just asked me how to use the tool. I would’ve shown you.” The lesson I learned here (and one of the most important ones in the business) is if you don’t know how to use something, just ask.

In plumbing, there are many lessons you can learn from either safety hazards on the job to properly using a tool. All of these lessons are very important on the job. The most important lesson on the job stems back from the main core lesson for an apprentice and that is how to be a good apprentice. If you can ask how, why, when, what and any other questions, you will be a

good apprentice. The less you ask the more likely you are to mess things up. Plumbing is a lot of repetition and by asking the same questions over and over it helps you to better learn your trade to the fullest. Mistakes are meant to be made; the mistakes that are corrected and learned from are considered lessons well learned. Without learning from our mistakes there is no point in the lesson.

What I Have Learned

Alex

Working as a plumber you come across many different life-changing events. Many of them show lessons eventually somewhere down the line. Sometimes they are like riddles and other times they are just staring at us right in our faces.

I will never forget the time when I used to work in a nonunion company. Everything about it was so fast paced. All you would hear the foreman say was, “Hurry up! We have to finish this job ASAP.” So, of course, I would speed up my pace. Don’t get me wrong, I worked faster but I still did an excellent job at everything I was sent to do. But working at a fast pace didn’t help me much when I joined the union about a year after I started plumbing.

I began working in the union and was constantly speeding through all the work that was given to me. If my foreman sent me to get something, I was running, just so I could be back as fast as possible and to avoid giving him a reason to yell at me. I guess after a while my foreman noticed my speedy attentiveness to everything he told me to do and he pulled me to the side. Now keep in mind that this is my first week on the job, so you can imagine the things that were running through my mind. But once my foreman started talking about the way I was working I started to listen to him.

He told me, to make a long story short, to slow down. He told me all different kinds of accidents he went through. He also told me about accidents his co-workers were involved in and how the majority of them were due to someone rushing through their job. He also told me that whether we try and fly through a job or take our time in the end the job will get done. But the question really is: Do you want the job done right? Most jobs that are rushed through are the ones that usually need a plumber to go back and fix the original problem once again. When all his advice finally settled, in I realized he was absolutely right. I’ve seen my father while I was growing up nearly killed because of accidents other people caused. So, the whole time I stayed on this job with this foreman, I slowed down and became more precautious.

There came a day when we finished that job and I was sent to another jobsite with another foreman. This guy wasn’t the same as my former foreman. My new foreman reminded me a lot of the foreman I worked with when I was in my nonunion shop. He wanted everything done as fast as humanly possible.

I tried to remember the advice I was given in the previous months before, but when you have someone of a higher authority constantly down your back telling you to go faster, you eventually just do it.

One day while working, my foreman sent me to cut a piece of Kindorf, which is a piece of steel with holes that we use for support. The proper way my father taught me was to put Kindorf on a vice, which will hold it so it doesn't jump while you cut it with an electric sawzall. Now plenty of times in my past union shops we didn't carry vises around and we cut Kindorf and rod in our hands. It is a very dangerous and stupid thing for anyone to do. So as my foreman rushed me and sent me to cut the Kindorf with a vice in the immediate area, I did what I used to do. I cut the Kindorf using just my hands and an old blade on the sawzall. I began to cut the Kindorf and in an instant the blade jumped and hit my hand.

I dropped everything and prayed my finger was still there. I didn't want to look even though I had my glove on. I finally looked at the glove and it was soaked in blood. I quickly took the glove off and checked to see if my finger was still there. Thank God my nail had stopped the blade from going all the way through, but it did cause a nice clean laceration and also cut off a nice chunk of meat. My foreman then grabbed me and took me straight to the hospital. Since it was such a clean cut and my nail was split in half, the doctors couldn't stitch it up. I don't think the doctor knew what she was doing. She actually tried to rip the nail off, and I almost knocked her out. It was a horrible experience. She had to make a few phone calls to find out the proper way to handle this kind of situation.

After almost losing one of my most necessary fingers, I will never rush through any workday again. It takes an extra 5-10 minutes to do a job properly and not get hurt, as I had to learn the hard way. Anytime a foreman rushes me, the first thing that comes to mind is my safety, so I pay him no mind no matter who is doing the rushing. The advice that was given to me doesn't just work on the job but also in our everyday lives.

Another valuable lesson that I have learned is how not to be impatient. Working in the union you come across quite a few impatient people. But many times with impatience comes accidents, some worse than others. A few years ago, I was working in downtown Manhattan on the 30th floor of an office building. We had been working on this job for a few weeks and I had been working alongside the same mechanic from the start.

One day it was almost time for us to start packing up to go, and we were still doing last minute adjustments. When I say last minute adjustments I mean we had to remove an old nipple from a brass valve on a cold winter line. So we shut the valve off because we wanted to replace it with a precautionary plug, just in case someone accidentally opened the valve water wouldn't pour out everywhere. This was a really old line and I saw the mechanic only had one pair of pliers. One thing I always heard from my father was to always use two pliers all the time. The proper way is to hold back on your work so you don't break anything.

I told this guy to relax and that I'd go get the other pliers. He told me that he just wanted to get out of there already, and that he would get it with just one pliers. I told him to think before he acts. I reminded him that if something went wrong we'd be stuck here all night. He then pulled out a cigarette and said he'd smoke a cigarette while I went to get the pliers. I took the elevator down to the first floor and went to the truck.

By the time I got back to the elevator, I knew something was wrong because I saw water seeping through one of the elevator doors. When I finally got back upstairs he looked like he had jumped in a pool, he was soaked. I didn't want to laugh but it was hard not to. He told me to try and keep the pressure down while he looked for the next valve to shut the main water line off. I held it for a couple of minutes which was pointless because the water was still going everywhere anyway. It didn't take too long for him to find the valve, but the damage had already been done. The water went all the way downstairs destroying a lot of things.

I don't know exactly what was destroyed but I do know that it was a lot. I was told that there were guys cleaning up water for days. I didn't ever work with this mechanic or on this jobsite ever again. After experiencing that, I definitely can say I learned my lesson and I hope he did too. I didn't only learn how big patience was, but also no matter how old you are, how much you think you know, or even how long you've been in the business there is always something new to learn. Not only did this mechanic not have patience, he refused to take my advice.

We all are living in such a fast paced society that we never just slow down and patiently take a good look at what's next to us, or what's right or wrong until it's too late, and we are either badly hurt, seriously injured or, worst of all, killed. So, now when things seem to be getting a little crazy at work and I'm getting rushed or dealing with the impatience of other people, I just take a deep breath and slowly walk to my next destination.

Word Travels

Arie S.

No matter where you find yourself on God's green earth people talk and word travels. Whether whispered or shouted, first hand or relayed, word travels. Journalists call it reporting, tabloids call it gossip, your average nine-to-five may dub it water cooler talk, but on a construction site it is simply and commonly referred to as talking shit.

Have no doubt that the biggest, meanest and toughest construction worker is completely capable of weaving together both complex and judgmental tales about the most mundane details of his co-workers' lives. This is an individual who thrives on stirring the pot, passing along any dirty little secrets his overly curious ears might pick up, occasionally embellishing the story to satisfy his own amusement. He also will show no reservation or remorse when using the bounty of his eavesdropping against his fellow tradesman to improve his own personal position or to falsely gain the trust of someone that he will be throwing under the bus at a later time.

Though they are at times not easily spotted, all shit talkers reveal themselves eventually; there are certain traits one must look for. For instance, there is the overly opinionated underachiever, always a prime suspect to be a shit talker due to the fact that he will show no hesitation in judging the work of others while he himself is not producing up to even his own standards. He will meticulously study the work of others, actively seeking a minor mistake or oversight he can exaggerate and run back to the foreman with. The overly opinionated underachiever considers his job security to be a numbers game, meaning the more people he can make look worse than himself the better off he will be when jobs come to a close and layoffs are on the horizon.

Another shit talker to beware of is the one I call the troublemaker. A troublemaker finds pleasure and amusement in pitting people against one another. He will make random statements that are borderline malicious as a way to bait unsuspecting simpletons to cross the line for him. He is an expert at nudging people into confrontations. Unlike the over opinionated underachiever, the troublemaker wants to sway the opinions of others towards his own beliefs, all the while keeping himself seemingly neutral.

As an apprentice in the field of building trades, it is important to avoid shit talkers at all costs. It will be difficult at first, but becomes second nature later. It is imperative for apprentices to be mindful of what they say and to whom they say it. Journeymen adhere to the adage that apprentices are to be seen and not heard. There is more to that statement than just an establishment of hierarchy. I honestly believe it is for the protection of the apprentice as well. The only way to learn how to deal with the general population in the field of construction is to observe how the experienced handle themselves.

Unfortunately, sooner or later, everybody gets caught up in the soap opera that is a work site. I had gotten word from my foreman that the shop we were employed by was experiencing some difficulties and may have to let some people go. That was on Monday. A few days later he told me that the shop was going to keep me until the end of the week. I was a little upset; it never feels good to get laid off even if you know that it is simply the nature of the business. Nevertheless, I went about my day, admittedly not at the same pace that I would usually exhibit, when a mechanic from a different trade turned to me and said “Hey kid, what’s the matter? You look like somebody shit in your oatmeal.” To which I replied, “They just told me that my check’s on the way.” He continues, “Who are they gonna get to finish the work they got here?” Again I reply, “I’m sure they got some shop guys they wanna keep workin,” shrugging my shoulders. Seemingly innocent banter.

By coffee the next day my foreman was confronting me about the conversation I had, asking me if I was spreading a rumor that the shop was laying off so that they could keep the shop guys working. There was more too. He was wondering why I was telling everybody he was a “scumbag,” that he never did any work, etc. I never said anything like that. It turned out to be a game of construction site telephone. The only person that the subject of the layoff was discussed with was that one guy whose name I can’t even remember, and now, it’s come full circle to bite me in the ass.

Word travels that quickly. The moral is watch what you say and to whom you say it. Always be mindful of what comes out of your mouth for once it is said it cannot be taken back.

Lessons Learned

Matt Brophy

Over the past 16 years, I have learned many lessons about many things in the plumbing trade. One lesson I must stress is safety. Looking back, there are quite a few things I have learned about this topic. Another lesson is to treat your body as a temple because in this trade you will need it for the long haul. Also, I would add be on time for work and be proficient, if you expect not to be thrown around from shop to shop. I have learned a few tricks of the trade in my life as a plumber, simple solutions not known until someone showed me. Life in general is full of lessons; half my life I've been plumbing, and half (if not more) of my days are dedicated to my field.

To begin with, we must not forget how important safety must be on construction sites. I'll talk about a number of safety issues I have encountered, each of them a different story and time. I feel safety should be taken very seriously, for my life and those around me are constantly at risk. The union construction trades offer many good things to their employees, one being that they keep safety on the front burner. I've gotten into the mindset to always work as safely as possible, so that the next day I may do the same. There have been some tragic deaths this past year and I think it would benefit all to remember safety first.

One of my first safety memories was about the age of 15. I was working in a dusty and dark basement one morning. I was working hard as usual, digging a trench in a customer's house. While hustling around the basement, I noticed a sharp half inch pipe sticking out of the ceiling. The pipe was at about eye height and I knew this could be a hazard. Quickly, I showed my boss and he told me he would bend it up out of the way. So I continued to work, carrying buckets of dirt outside and dumping them into the dump truck. I recall I took maybe a five minute break to get some fresh air. Then I proceeded back down the stairs into the basement. I was all ready to start digging again and was making my way to the shovel ahead. All of a sudden, I wacked my eye right into the half-inch pipe. I don't even remember what I yelled, but I remember falling to my knees and the sting in my eye. My boss came rushing over and saw what happened. Now naturally, he felt horribly for what had happened. He rushed me to an eye specialist, where the doctor examined my eye. He told me that if the pipe had hit any closer to the cornea, I would have been blind in that eye. At this point, lesson learned. Always wear eye protection on

the job! Number two: it wouldn't hurt to double check safety hazards before continuing work. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to learn a lesson that day even though it was an accident.

Another lesson, which I think is very important by the way is keeping your body a temple. The plumbing trade involves a lot of rigorous work at times, so be sure to be prepared as well as possible for the next day. In this I mean get plenty of rest to keep your bones and mind fresh for the job. One night I went out late, knowing the next day I had some hard work ahead of me. I remember straggling my way into work that Saturday morning. The boss explained that he needed a 50 foot trench dug for a gas line to a garage. The catch? We were going to dig by hand that day. Boy, was this a killer to my system. No matter how many cups of coffee I drank, I found myself sleeping at the shovel. I was wishing I would have gotten more sleep and drank less alcohol. I remember promising myself never to stay out late on a work night again – a promise which I know I have broken a few times over the years. The lesson: hard workers need good rest to be able to work to their full potential the next day.

A huge lesson I have learned is to be on time and proficient at work. Have you ever been that guy at work who is late? At times, I've gotten into ruts and have not kept promptness at the top of my list. This can be a reflection of your overall character and attitude on the job. Recently, I must admit, I also have been late to work a few times. If my train was five minutes late, I was five minutes late. My foreman had a talk with me, and explained that he didn't really mind. However, he explained that even the walls have ears. In this I mean you never know who could be watching, so always try your best to do the little things right in the big picture. Also, I think it's extremely important to keep yourself busy at work. I try to give 100 percent on the job every day. It's not important to see what others are doing, but rather examine yourself and what you can give that particular day. I found that abiding by this may leave you a little leeway in areas that you may make mistakes in. Lesson: be on time, be ready to work and work diligently. Those in senior positions will appreciate especially these efforts, which may help you stay employed.

Finally, I get to talk about tools – not every man's dream but definitely for some. One day while on a job, my partner and I were messing with some pipes near a water main. I remember stepping on this pipe that was on the ground. Next thing I heard was "Pop," and the next thing I felt was water all over my back. Yes, it was a water main break. The problem? We didn't have the water key to shut the main in the street. Quickly, my partner improvised,

by grinding a notch at the bottom of a one-inch metal pipe. He slid his contraption down the valve stem, turned his homemade tool, and presto the water was off. This all happened in a matter of minutes, and I was amazed how well my partner kept his cool. I also commended him for his quick fix invention, knowing maybe one day I may have to do the same. You can always learn something from other plumbers. Everyone has some kind of trick up their sleeve to get by when necessary. Lesson: pay attention, learn, take in, and most of all stay calm.

Lessons in life are valuable to us and help mold who we are. Always be on the lookout for hazards and protect yourself with the right safety gear. Treat your body well and allow yourself ample sleep for the next day of work. Make it a point to show up a little early to work if you can, and work hard with a purpose. If you happen to find yourself in an emergency situation stay calm, learn to adapt and overcome, and remember the lessons either taught by yourself or others. Plumbing is sculpting who I am and who I want to be and not everything is perfect. If there is just a little bit you can learn, just to get you a little bit further, it is worth it in the end.

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