

Angela Allen

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Interviewer: Robyn Schaapman. Location: Building Trades of Alberta

AA: I was born in Calgary, Alberta and I grew up there my whole life.

Q: What was the role of your family in the development of your work choice?

AA: The role of my family in the development of my work choice. Well my dad is a carpenter, so he's in the trades. I think my mom always wanted me to go to school but I'm more of a hands-on person.

Q: How did your family respond to your choice of going into the trades?

AA: Can you ask the question again?

Q: Can you describe how your family responded to your wanting to go into the trades?

AA: My family thought it was a good idea for me to go into the trades.

Q: Did you have any role models or mentors?

AA: I did not have any role models or mentors going into the trades.

Q: How did your initial job hunting go?

AA: I technically did not hunt for my job. I was bartending at the time and there was this old Italian guy who wanted me to work for him. He saw me lugging beers so he's like, she's strong, I could use her; she's got a good work ethic.

Q: How old were you?

AA: I was 19, I think I just turned 19 when I started the trades.

Q: Were you the first woman on the crew?

AA: I was the first female cement finisher in the City of Calgary in the sidewalk division. Our company did have a girl; I think she just worked slurry but she did do a little bit of the hand tools. But she never worked for a long time and she didn't get her red seal in cement finishing, so first cement finisher in concrete.

Q: Describe your job.

AA: As a concrete finisher or cement finisher, well there's different positions. We're on the sidewalks, we do sidewalks. I started as a labourer on the shovel and then I moved up to pulling the screed and doing the back edge, and then steel trowel, deep cuts, putting the cuts in the concrete. Then I went into the gutter, which is lifting the gutter to make those little curbs and doing that kind of stuff. We pretty much just take the concrete and place it and finish it.

Q: Did management make efforts to facilitate your inclusion in the workplace?

AA: That's a good question. It took my boss two weeks to convince the office to hire a girl, because they didn't think that a woman would be able to do the job. It took them two weeks. My first day I was so tired I could barely stand. They said, take a day off. I was like, obviously I'm not going to take a day off, because that's going to look really bad. So I just showed up the next day and kept going.

Q: How did your coworkers receive you?

AA: Everybody in the workplace received me differently. There were a few really supportive people and there were a few different cultural people that didn't think I should be in the

workplace. I was told to go home and make babies on a couple of occasions. Some people did not like me being there, but for the most part everyone was really good.

Q: Were there extra challenges you faced as a woman on the construction site?

AA: No, there were definitely not any challenges that I faced being a woman on the construction site. If I had to go to the bathroom they would take me to the bathroom, or any of those kind of issues.

Q: Why did you choose to join the union?

AA: The company I work for is unionized, it's a union company. I got the job through the company, not through the union, but being part of the union now I realize that it's a good advantage for sure. My job is seasonal so it's good to be unionized, because they can find jobs for me when we're off season.

Q: Does your union offer other benefits, such as pension?

AA: My union offers a great deal of training benefits, pension. I definitely support union for sure.

Q: Do you want to talk about your heritage?

AA: I am a Heinz 57. My dad is Native German, my mom is Scottish, Irish, English. My dad has his Masters Degree in Education, so he taught on the reserve out in Morley. My mom started as a secretary in a church and worked her way up, and now she's a big oil company executive assistant. Both my parents do very different things, and they've always just supported whatever I've wanted to do.

Q: Do you have comments about maternity and childcare issues?

AA: I don't have anything to speak to about maternity yet.

Q: What challenges and achievements did you experience in the workplace?

AA: I experienced all kinds of achievements I guess. Challenges, it's definitely interesting being the only woman in our company. You kind of feel like you're ganged up on by a bunch of guys, especially when you get a little emotional sometimes, being a woman, and men rarely understand that. Again achievements, I'm the first cement finisher that can do everything in the sidewalk division in Calgary, so that's a pretty big deal; it feels good. I've got my red seal. I challenged the exam. I already had all the hours, so I got to challenge the exam so I can say I have a red seal, which is different for a labourer, because I'm part of a labourers' union. But I have my red seal, so that feels good.

Q: What does red seal mean?

AA: I'm a journeyman, a red seal means you're a journeyman. Depending on which trade. There's journeyman red seal electrician, red seal plumbers, all kinds of trades.

Q: Can you describe a typical workday?

AA: For me a typical workday is we start at 7 and do a hazard assessment and safety tool box meeting, all those kinds of things. The truck is usually waiting by the time we get to the jobsite. We just keep going. We don't really have scheduled breaks. We pour the trucks as they come and then kind of eat in between when we get a chance. Usually our days are between 10 and 12 hours, six days a week.

Q: So you don't have a regular schedule, you go until the concrete is set?

AA: We go until, ya, we have a watchman to watch the concrete after we pour and place, but if the concrete is pouring we have to be placing and finishing. My boss will order the trucks and

once he orders the last truck, when he sees we're all dead and tired, he'll call the last truck and that's about it.

Q: What skills are required, and how did you acquire them?

AA: Skills are obviously learned by watching and practise. They kind of start you off as a labourer and you kind of get yelled at and screamed at until you figure it out. I guess that's kind of just the way you learn everything else, you just kind of jump from tool to tool. Whatever you learn and get good at, they kind of want to keep you there.

Q: What changes have you seen in your work throughout your career?

AA: I definitely noticed my ability to see a level. Our job is to make the water drain into the sewers, that's curb and gutter. Before I wouldn't know where there was too much concrete or there wasn't enough concrete. Over time you definitely learn to see, like you can just see without using a flat edge, you can see where it's high and where it's low. So I definitely learned the finesse, I guess, it's kind of an art. So I definitely learned some finesse over the years.

Q: Were you ever injured at work?

AA: Not per se, I was not really injured at work. I don't know, slips and trips, right? I think everyone does that. Sore muscles, ya, but nothing over the top.

Q: Have you ever had to take any kind of labour action?

AA: I have not had to do that. I have not had to file any kind of grievances. I have had conflicts but that was dealt with internally within the company, so I've never had to file a grievance.

Q: Did you take part in actions to support the broader trade labour movement?

AA: No.

Q: Do you want to talk about the politics of your union or how leaders are elected?

AA: No.

Q: What do you like to do in your free time?

AA: My free time? Well that's part of the reason why being a cement finisher was so appealing, because you get to be outside. I love to be outside. I love hiking, camping, shooting guns – I'm an outdoorsy kind of person. Snowboarding in the winter, ya.

Q: Are you involved in any community groups?

AA: I am not.

Q: Do you want to talk about your marriage or relationship?

AA: I met my husband through a staff work party. It was pretty fun. It was actually my girlfriend that was interested in him and he was like, I don't like you, I like her. So that was nice, because he's my lobster. We met and if it wasn't for my job I wouldn't have met him, which is cool.

Q: Do you two work on the same crew?

AA: No we don't, thankfully, work on the same crew; that could be a lot. Same company, different crew. He's from Ireland so he couldn't believe that a woman did concrete let alone any other trade, because that doesn't happen in Ireland. I think it's getting bigger now since he's been here, but he had never seen any woman doing any kind of job. He started on the shovel as well, so he's like, what, a girl would do this? I remember he'd come after we'd started dating for a bit, he'd come over and he was just done and he'd be like, I can't believe you did this for so long.

Q: When did he come to Canada?

AA: Five years ago almost.

Q: Has Anto's perception of women in the trades changed since knowing you?

AA: Anto's perception has definitely changed about women in the workplace since he's met me.

Q: How did you become involved in promoting women in the trades?

AA: I was scouted I guess by my union. We have a lot of women, but at the time I was Local 1111, now we've amalgamated with Local 92, the Edmonton group. But before, there weren't too many women in our union. I'd just worked there for so long and I had my red seal so they're like, hey she'd be a good candidate. So they brought me in with Build Together, and I love being part of Build Together. At first nobody really knew what it was about, because we're just growing and trying to figure out what we do. But it meant a lot to have other women in the trades, to have their support and their input.

Q: Why did you join Build Together?

AA: I joined because I had questions and concerns about women in the trades. I wanted to know if it was just me who had all these issues or if there were other women in other trades. I think it's important to have that solidarity for all kinds of different ethnicities, different like LGBTQ, and those kind of things. It's important to have that solidarity. I had childcare questions, like what happens. It's such a male dominated trade that it's nice to know that there's women out there working towards making life easier for all kinds of people.

Q: When did you start with the company you're with now?

AA: In 2006 I started. I came up the stairs with a bunch of beers and my boss was just like, you wanna do concrete? I was working at an Italian social club at the time. Obviously everyone

knows that Italians do concrete and they're like, you can't do it. I'm like, yes I can, I'll do it better than all of you. Which isn't necessarily true, but I definitely proved myself I think. That's been 13 years now, 14 next season.

Q: Where did that confidence come from?

AA: I've always been a tomboy and always liked doing stuff that boys like to do. I've just kind of always had something to prove, I guess. I've always felt like I've had something to prove. I wasn't very academic per se, so ya, I kind of tried to excel in other fields.

Q: When you were learning on the job, what kind of input did you get from coworkers?

AA: Everybody was different when I was learning. Some people were really helpful. I do have a mentor now. He was there when I first started on the same crew, and I worked with him this last year as well. He was always like, ya, she's wicked, she's doing an awesome job, better than so many of the other labourers we've had. But then I've had a couple of older generation people that were just like, she shouldn't be doing this, and would purposely try to teach me the wrong thing just so I wouldn't get ahead. I think it might be a pride thing for them, they don't want me to excel I guess. They kind of want to be up there and want everyone else down there. So there's been a lot of different kinds of influences.

Q: Do you get comments when people see you working on a crew?

AA: Oh ya. For Valentine's Day one year I got a pair of hot pink rubber boots. They weren't safety, don't tell anybody that. I don't know if we want to keep that on the record or off the record. But they were hot pink rubber boots and I'd get cars honking like crazy. My boss has always been really proud, like I'm the only guy with a girl, kind of thing. He's always been really proud of me, so that's nice.

Q: You mentioned there were other women in Local 1111 and Local 92.

AA: There's a good number of women in Local 92 but there weren't very many in 1111. I think there was only four within 800 of 1111, but now I can't remember the stats, but there's quite a bit more because it's not just curb and gutter, there's a lot more different trades and different things to do within the Labourers Union of Edmonton.

Q: What kind of questions or input do you get from other women in your local?

AA: To tell you the truth, I don't know too many other women in my local. There's not very many women that show up to the monthly meetings, especially in Calgary. I'm from Calgary, so the vast majority of women are out of Edmonton and it's just too much for me to come up here to meet the Edmonton girls. That's why it was a big deal for me to be part of the Build Together group, because I didn't really know any other women in the trades. I was the one looking for questions versus answering them.

Q: Are you active in your community in any way? Have you tried to encourage other young women to follow in your footsteps?

AA: I've talked to some women. We actually did have another woman on our crew last year but she didn't really make it. Concrete is a very hard job and you have to be fast. You have to be able to do what you're doing and fast, so it's kind of hard. It's hard for me to say, hey you should be a cement finisher. I've seen women doing residential but there aren't too many women who have approached me and said, hey I wanna do concrete.

Q: Does your community celebrate or recognize your achievements?

AA: They do for sure. At my end of the year union party I had a mention, a shout out I guess. My business manager just said, hey Angela, she's been working for 13 years and we'd really like to acknowledge and thank her for the work she's done with Build Together. It was really cool; that was really nice. It's not just my company, but in the City of Calgary the entire sidewalk division, if you ask them about the girl that works for Marmot, they all know that there's a girl that works for Marmot Concrete. Even if I don't know them personally, people come up to me

and they're like, hey you work for Marmot, right? I'm like, ya I do. So that's cool, it's cool to be acknowledged in that way.

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