

1975 - 1978

I attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, majoring in Painting and Sculpture on a merit scholarship. Due to some shenanigans on the part of my father, who was a bit of a petty con artist, I lost my scholarship and began to take out loans until the reality of how large debt I was going to end up with sank in. During my time at S.A.I.C. I was exposed to some of the more important feminist artists of the time, Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" and early performance pieces by Laurie Anderson. One of my closest friends Cheryl Hidalgo made a feminist film in the all male film department and I was part of the hoo haw raised from the faculty who tried to invalidate her work and her public exposure of their attitudes. It was the typical fine arts environment of the time, all male professors except in the "female ghettos" of fiber and ceramics.

1978

I crossed the City of Chicago on the Madison St bus. I walked into the headquarters of Jesse Jackson's Operation Push. I was interviewed. I signed up on the waiting lists for several building trade apprenticeship programs.

1980

I was called by the Elevator Constructors Union. I went to work as an apprentice elevator constructor. Building an elevator is really similar to a railroad only vertical. I never had apprenticeship indentureship papers to sign and, there was no school or training.

1981

I saw my first fatal accident on a Friday the thirteenth, (which is how I remember the date) at lunchtime on a concrete pour next door. The pillar rebar the iron worker climbed wasn't tied in properly where it attached to the deck and a gust of wind blew it right off the building with the poor man on it. 23 years old. Two kids. I saw OSHA come and shut our building and that one down, everyone sent home, paid. They were afraid of riots, you see.

After about nine months without being able to get rid of me, they told me I was going to get a big promotion. I was going to be a service tech! Lucky me. No more hauling around rails, just responding to service calls on elevators in hospitals, office buildings etc. Except, the real idea was to get me hurt or killed by forcing me to clean and oil machinery by myself in isolated machine rooms while the elevators were still running which means the governor's were spinning, the machines were whirring with the cables passing over them at 1200 fpm. The electrical panels crackled. The "journeyman" sat in the bar. The apprentice did all the work. The men on the construction site were pretty decent and I had the protection of my partner Timmy. These men were sallow, slack jawed lumps with flaccid bodies and thoughts to match.

1982

After all this failed to send me packing (but I was getting close), they announced that I had to go work in the projects - Cabrini Green, to be specific. At this time, the Chicago firefighters wouldn't go in there without a police escort but the elevator mechanics were supposed to keep the elevator's running. Not being suicidal (though I wonder about that one from time to time), I quit. The rest of that year, and into the next, I worked at the Chicago Yacht Club as a waitress.

1983

I received a letter from the International Association of Sheetmetal Workers, Local 73 with an offer of a sheetmetal apprenticeship. I went to the office and was indentured, officially. I was given a bizarre extra special hazing by the union leadership but that's another story. I began working that year at Pullman Sheet Metal in an industrial park near 95th and Stony Island. I began working in menial jobs such as running the drive cleat machine. The shop I was working in was engaged in fabrication of regular commercial sheet metal fittings and ductwork and very heavy ductwork for various nuclear power plants, making it a much larger than usual operation. The conditions were loud, dirty and dangerous. I was injured late that year, my finger was crushed in a crude break machine I was using to form clips for dampers. There was no finger/hand guard.

1984

Once a week I attended trade school for my formal education in welding, lay out, and fabrication. We were assigned common and uncommon fittings to make in miniature, a very old system by which apprentices are made to make the sheet metal conform to complex shapes on a very small scale which is difficult to do as sheet metal becomes challenging to form as it loses its flexibility in a small size.

Washburne Trade School was physically enormous, occupying the old Continental Can Company Factory building, a full two city blocks long at 32nd and Kedzie Ave. The sheet metal apprenticeship program took up only a small area on the third floor and other trades rented space - electricians, carpenters, along with City of Chicago trade school programs for welding, cooking, automotive, etc. I was afraid of many of my fellow apprentices and quite scared to walk the halls by myself. There were a few women here and there in the building but I was quite isolated. Even going to the bathroom was stressful. Out of nowhere, I was approached later that year by a lawyer for the Department of Justice in the hallway. They asked if they could interview me as a witness in a class action law suit filed under Title IX alleging the violation of the civil rights of women at what was a public school facility owned by the City of Chicago. It was called "Women at Washburne". They assured me I would remain anonymous but as I was the only woman in my trade, so anonymous didn't mean much. But, I went ahead.

At the time, I wasn't sure how things could get any worse, especially from the apprenticeship co-ordinator who made it his business to "drop in" on my day of the week to attend and set a wonderful example for my classmates by making "fun" jokes about my body. When I didn't

laugh, he was delighted to explain that "It must be that time of the month". This was the individual in charge of the apprenticeship program, and I could tell that his comments made my teachers and a few of my fellow apprentices very uncomfortable. But he was in charge.

After my testimony and some additional investigation, the Department of Justice ordered the Sheet Metal Workers Local 73 to turn over all the completed applications for the apprenticeship program.

The Union had testified in a deposition that there were no female applicants, and denied any less than stellar treatment of me - the only woman in the union.

It took a court order and some armed US Marshalls to confiscate the filing cabinets at Local 73's headquarters, 205 W. Wacker Dr. While the union co-ordinator, Keith Switzer, looked on in rage. I found out about this drama later, from some of the secretaries who worked at union headquarters. Surprise, surprise, there were a number of women who had applied but up until me they had been able to keep us out by only allowing a single woman in at a time then harassing them til they quit. Like what happened to me in the elevator trade. Now, the gig was up and they began to admit other women, though I didn't see or work with them.

I have gone into detail here because it set the stage for the results of the enormous grudge the Union leaders now held against me. One might fairly describe it as a vendetta. Every time they saw my name or saw me, I was a reminder of why they had to open their doors to women, like they had been forced by law ten years earlier to open their program to Black men. They ended up treating the women who followed me quite differently, frightened into far more civilized behavior.

1986

I was transferred to the field, which was the installation of the ductwork we fabricated, mostly in high rise office buildings in the Chicago Loop. In December of 1986, I fell from a dangerously installed scaffold and broke my hip. I was off for a year, recuperating. I returned to work and graduated as a journeyman in 1987.

1987 - 1989

I worked as a sheet metal journeyman in construction. I was lucky. I had several very wonderful partners, which is key when you work in the field as that is who you spend the whole day with and work with.

1990

I had the opportunity to train as a HVAC balancing technician. They are the sheet metal workers who have more of a white collar job, inspecting the fans before the system is turned on, perform tests to prove the system is working to specifications and balance the air flow to different areas per engineering requirements. I did quite well though the physics of air flow and

the mathematics were challenging to me. Again, I had a great partner and teacher who taught me problem solving, organization, and confidence along with balancing.

The inevitable problems came after I earned my certification. For example, I learned that I successfully completed jobs in half the time that was bid in the contract. However, I was told by managers that "I lost money for the company on because I was so slow". Bringing this up to my boss only brought forth jokes and invitations for "dinner" and reports of complaints from other balancers who said I was "difficult". I began to notice that my fellow balancers were all paid over scale but not I. The jealousy and back biting just disgusted me. Duplicitous, lying bastards! Plus, there were too many opportunities to be put into a physically dangerous situation because, again, one was often isolated in a machine room with dangerous equipment. With a few exceptions (like my teacher), these were men of no honor.

1992

I went "back to the tools" meaning I returned to working as a regular construction worker.

1994

My mother was diagnosed with late stage ovarian cancer. I left the trade, and returned to our home in Vermont to help. I never took a proper "withdrawal card" with the Union past the first six months. It was like I awoke from a bad dream.