

Changing Traditional Roles in the World of Work

FOLLOWING YOUR DREAM SOMETIMES MEANS FOLLOWING A CAREER PATH THAT IS NOT WIDELY TRAVELED BY OTHERS OF YOUR GENDER, AS TWO OF THE STUDENTS AT VERMONT'S STAFFORD TECHNICAL CENTER ARE PROVING.

ALTHOUGH MAJOR STRIDES HAVE BEEN made in recent years in what we will call occupational desegregation, a high degree of difference still remains in occupations that have traditionally been considered to be “gender specific.” Employment analysts continue to debate what criteria constitutes a “female” or “male” occupation, but most agree that when an occupation’s employment is dominated by 70 percent or more of one sex, it is gender specific. Generally, over the past 20 years, both men and women have been successful in moving into occupational groups where there has been a greater demand for workers.

Since there is a greater need for workers in these faster-growing occupations, growth could lower barriers to entry in traditionally gender-specific fields. For example, women and men are most equally represented among managers and professionals. However, women still outnumber men in professional specialties such as elementary school teachers (15 percent men), and men account for the large majority of employees in professional specialty areas such as public safety services (16 percent women).

But nowhere is the difference in gender distribution more profound than for nurses and automotive technicians. According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 1.8 percent of all mechanics employed in both independent and manufacturer-operated repair facilities are women. This means that of the 954,000 automotive technicians and mechanics who are employed in the United States, only 17,000 are women.

Sadly, gender equity in our health care system doesn’t fare any better, with a paltry six percent of all registered nurses in the United States being men. Employment analysts who

study these differences and trends maintain that the disparity can be blamed on a number of factors that include types of jobs that have expanded or declined, societal attitudes about gender roles, personal preferences, and in some cases, employer and workplace discrimination.

Leveling the Playing Field

Although these statistics might seem to be unimpressive, there is at least some cause for celebration in the automotive industry. While the number of total technicians employed in the field over the past 15 years has increased by just 10 percent, the number of women technicians employed during this same period of time has increased 75 percent. Clearly these numbers point to the conclusion that more and more women are electing to pursue careers in the automotive repair field.

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But this infusion of the opposite sex doesn’t appear to be happening for men entering the field of nursing. Employment analysts from the U. S. Department of Labor have determined that less than six percent of the nation’s 2.7 million registered nurses are men, and males account for about eight percent of students enrolled in four-year-college nursing programs, even with the health care industry facing an acute shortage of nurses.

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If past history is any indication, when there has been a labor shortage in other occupations, higher salaries, improved working conditions and opportunities for advancement have drawn new blood into the field. But thus far, there is little evidence to suggest that men are knocking down the doors to enter the field, even though these incentives are in place. And these discouraging statistics in labor and industry are mirrored in the recruitment efforts of our nation's career and technical centers as well, where many of the technical programs that have been traditionally classified as "men's" or "women's" careers continue to struggle to lower the gender barrier.

Gender equity initiatives in education have been launched in the state of Vermont in an attempt to level the playing field in gender-specific programs, but when it's all said and done, the question still remains: are we making any progress at the grassroots level in career and technical education? If the personal stories of Stafford Technical Center students Robert Maranville and Emily Daniels are any indication of its success, it would appear that some inroads have been made for future students in these two career paths.

Man Enough for Nursing

Robert Maranville entered the health careers academy at Stafford Technical Center in Rutland, Vermont, with an aspiration to become a nurse. The face of the usually quiet but pleasant senior who found his way to Stafford Technical Center through Mount St. Joseph Academy lights up when he talks about anything having to do with health care. With interests in medicine as wide as his smile, Maranville was able to explore a host of health career options through the health careers academy led by program instructor Kristen Jarvi.

An RN herself, Jarvi has had consistently strong enrollment in her program over the last several years, but struggles to find men who have the critical mixture of determination, skill—and courage—to

enter her program.

"Robert was extremely quiet when he first came to my program," Jarvi recalls. "He also wanted to be an x-ray technologist, but quickly discovered the excitement that can be found in respiratory therapy."

According to Maranville, his family was extremely supportive of his interest in nursing, especially his father. But his peers were curious, if not a bit puzzled, about his decision to pursue a career in this field.

"It wasn't like a day-to-day taunting. But I definitely got the feeling that they thought I was a bit different," says Maranville. "As strange as it might sound, there's definitely still that perception out there among guys

money is great, but for me, it was the fact that health care is not a delicate field that was most appealing. You have to be competent and know how to take charge. When something bad happens, the respiratory therapist is one of the first people on the scene making sure that there is a clear and viable airway. It might sound a little unnerving to most people, but to me it's just business."

Such was the case when a woman was admitted suffering from keytone acetosis. Maranville remembers that her sugars were high, and she had slipped into a semi-coma.

"What was cool about this is that I



that, if you're a nurse and you're a guy, you must be gay."

However, any skepticism he had about the choice he was about to make was eliminated when a good friend of his who was enrolled in the culinary arts program at Stafford told him how cool the school—and program—were. This only helped to solidify his decision to enroll.

"My Dad knew that the economic side of this field was something that would benefit me," Maranville remembers. "The

▲▲ Nurse to Be

Robert Maranville appears right at home during his rotation in the DCU at Rutland Regional Medical Center.

started working on her airway—I got to be 'the man,'" he says.

These and other similar experiences steered Maranville toward the respiratory therapy program at Vermont Technical College, compliments of a scholarship provided to him through Rutland Regional

Medical Center. For the next two years, he will be working on his degree, thanks to a unique collaborative arrangement among innovative thinkers in the health care and education communities. The Community College of Vermont, Vermont Technical College, the Rutland Regional Medical Center and Vermont Interactive Television will provide the classroom instruction, clinical experience and lab training necessary for Maranville to complete the associate of applied science degree in respiratory therapy.

Maranville's eyes widen as he recounts a recent story that involved a high-birth-weight delivery at the Rutland Regional Medical Center, Vermont's second-largest health care facility.

"The baby was in some distress," notes Maranville. "He had aspirated some merconium during the delivery and was blue because he was having some trouble breathing. I intubated him with an endotracheal tube, and almost instantly the baby pinked up. It was an unbelievable feeling."

But Maranville also points out that, in reality, working in health care isn't always easy. Part of his rotation was working in the definitive care unit (DCU) with a range of health care professionals who were helping patients cope with unpleasant but necessary treatment, "in a unit where we work extra hard to bring out the best in people, no doubt about it," remarks Maranville.

As Jarvi recalls, Maranville made such an impression with the nursing staff in DCU that they lobbied to get him hired as a colleague after he completed his rotation. And if you think that the hands-on work isn't for the weak of heart, then the menu of courses Maranville is taking will put you in the cardiac care unit. Microbiology, anatomy and physiology, chemistry, and issues in patient care are just a few of the core courses that will monopolize Maranville's schedule over the next several months.

Jarvi uses a clinical and classroom strategy that is designed to expose her students to the many choices available to them in the health field, and it certainly helped

Maranville make his career choice.

"If I hadn't done Kristin's program at Stafford, I wouldn't have known how many options were open to me in health care," notes Maranville. "Coming to Stafford was like a breath of fresh air for me. My constant exposure to the field through our readings about issues in health care gave me a jumpstart on everybody else out there. It helped me determine exactly what I wanted to do."

Maranville firmly believes that, "If you show the guys the high-speed chases they can experience in the health care field—those things that provide them with an adrenalin rush—that will change attitudes really fast and get more men into nursing."

A Woman's Touch



Emily Daniels is just as enthusiastic and serious about her career path as Robert Maranville, but their personalities are a study in contrast. Daniels has more than

a hint of a devilish smile on her face, an outward sign of a personality that has made her a favorite of the faculty and staff at Stafford. But once she enters the automotive technology shop, it's all business.

"I guess I never really bought into the idea that there was a mold that a girl is supposed to fit," says Daniels.

That might be because, for as long as she can remember, she had a father and grandfather who let her "play" with the race cars they entered into the Saturday races at the Devil's Bowl Raceway in West Haven, Vermont. When Daniels was accepted into the automotive technology program at Stafford Technical Center, she became one of the first young women program instructor Jim Woodward had seen in his 10 years of teaching in technical education, and he noticed right away that Daniels was serious about cars.

"The minute she came into the shop, she took care of business," Woodward says.

He could also see that she understood

the mechanical theory behind motor vehicles, but needed the opportunity to apply what she knew in her head to customer vehicles in his shop.

"I can usually tell after having a student in my program for about a month whether they are in the program to learn how to repair their personal vehicle or if they want to do it for customers," says Woodward.

In Daniels he noticed that the normally outgoing Daniels was a bit timid when she first entered the program, but quickly settled in and established a good relationship with the 18 guys in the shop.

Daniels agrees, noting that, "The guys were pretty accepting of me and just considered me another person in the program."

But Daniels also found out that these same young men wouldn't be making any provisions for mediocrity in the performance department. She says that, "The guys don't cut you any slack because you're a girl, that's for sure. So I proved to them right off that I knew what I was doing under the hood."

Daniels' conviction and dedication to learning in the shop is matched by her desire to excel in the classroom. Stafford's automotive technology program is one of only six programs in the state of Vermont that are certified by the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation (NATEF)—the student arm of Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). In order to bring real-world value to what he expects his students to know when leaving his program, Woodward asks all of his techs to participate in the NATEF-ASE end-of-program test, an assessment that is based on the same test that industry-employed automotive technicians are expected to pass. Only 35 percent of all students nationally who take the examination pass all four core areas: brakes, steering and suspension, engine performance, and electrical systems.

As Woodward saw it, passing all four areas wasn't a challenge for Daniels because she was a girl; it was because she



▲▲ Women and Cars

Allison Woods (above) recently became the second Vermont woman to earn her NATEF-ASE credential, passing the “core” while a senior at Stafford Technical Center. She and Amanda Streeter (L) aren’t afraid to face a tough brake job or a camera when they’re in the automotive technology shop at Stafford.

was a first-year student. However, when it was all said and done, Daniels jumped all of the hurdles, passing each test handily on the first try.

Daniels believes that the days of having girls fit into an occupational mold are gradually fading. Instead, she would like to think that she is part of the new generation of workers who look at occupations as interest and ability based rather than gender based. She recalls coming to Stafford Technical Center as an eighth grader as one of the only girls who had a real interest in working on cars.

“While most of the girls who visited Stafford were interested in office technology, health careers, and the hospitality tourism management academy, I knew that the garage was where I wanted to be,” says Daniels.

Her female friends grew accustomed to seeing her under the hood of a car, but wouldn’t cut her any slack if she had made plans to go to the mall at 5:00, and she wasn’t ready because she had to get the grease off her hands.

“Somewhere along the line, I realized that fixing cars and being a girl wasn’t either/or . . . I could do both,” says Daniels.

Daniels is convinced that there is a

growing movement on the part of both young men and women to “get over the fear of being different.”

“Fitting in doesn’t mean being shallow and selling out,” says Daniels.

Industry analysts from ASE, the national nonprofit organization that tests and certifies repair professionals, agree that, as more women get into the field and do quality work, any preconceived notion that exists suggesting that automotive technology is a man’s job will be dispelled. And once they are under the hood, it won’t be long until other career paths are available to them in the same industry, including service writer, service manager, service parts department, engineering, technician training and sales.

Oddly enough, this is the same vision Daniels sees when she looks into her crystal ball. She sees herself opening her own garage with another woman or two, just to get the experience she needs to land her dream job of being a service manager for a large dealership in a major city somewhere in the United States.

She is quite convincing when she says that, “Eventually we’ll take over all of the garages and show you how it really should be done.”

Daring to be Different

The sobering reality for technical educators with regard to broadening representation of both men and women in nontraditional careers is that there needs to be a creative recruitment strategy designed that utilizes the enthusiasm and talents of successful role models such as Maranville and Daniels, who dared to be different. Role models can be important in influencing decisions made by boys and girls and in broadening the perception of career roles that people can play in our workforce.

Further, even though there has been a lot of positive thinking, and a lot of positive players and advocacy for change about broadening the perception that gender plays in making career decisions, there needs to be better coordination between education and employers to more effectively educate parents about, and recruit young people into, careers that were once considered to be gender specific. If boys or girls are looking for an exciting career that is nontraditional, it is absolutely imperative that they get exposure to these opportunities early on so they can at least consider them.

Pre-tech advising at the junior high school level should place a special emphasis on encouraging students of both genders to consider alternative career and technical programs. School officials should coordinate recruitment activities with employers who have been proven supporters of gender equity initiatives so that they can showcase the benefits of developing a diverse and competent workforce.

Let’s face it—attitude is everything. If educators and employers project an environment that suggests that the right candidate with the right attitude—regardless of gender—can be trained to do anything, then those industries will capture the attention of young men and women everywhere to make their programs and careers desirable and respectable. With this model in place, it would not be unique to see Emily Daniels repairing the ambulance that transported the patient Robert Maranville eventually brings back to life. **T**