



Rachel Nelson

Union Steamfitter Apprentice/Welder

CAREER QUICK LOOK

Years in Field:
2 years

City/State:
Kenosha County, WI

LinkedIn Profile:
None

Video Clip:
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Ethnicity:
Caucasian

School:
Milwaukee Area Technical College

Degree:
Welding Technical Diploma, Structural
Welding Certification

Career Pathway:
Steamfitter Journey Worker

Personal Time:
Time with 5-year old daughter, Music

Other:
Marine Veteran

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How did you get interested in Welding and what has your journey been like so far? What is your background?

After high school, I joined the military reserves for 6 years—the Marine Corps—and worked at Starbucks and other customer service jobs. When it came to buckling down and deciding on a career, I remembered the exploratory tech class I had taken in high school and how I had enjoyed the Welding classes and decided to pursue that. So, I signed up for MATC's one-year Welding program. I am a single mom with a 5-year-old daughter—living with my parents right now for that extra support.

Why did you decide to become a Steamfitter Apprentice?

After graduating from MATC, I worked for a company doing MIG Welding and production Welding wasn't satisfying at all to me. I first learned about Steamfitting at MATC but found out more about it at the Union Hall. It was something I was really interested in because there are so many different aspects of the trade, you will never learn everything! I took the test for it and was accepted as a Pre-Apprentice with a contractor and eventually got indentured. The contractor has a maximum of 13 months to decide to indenture a Pre-Apprentice. Luckily, I was indentured after a few months.

What do you love about your field?

You are always learning and that's what I love about it. There is so much to explore and I like the challenge of welding pipe.

What advice do you have for other women considering this career?

I would say just go for it; you are going to have so much support. The men are very supportive, which is very refreshing.

I want to emphasize don't be afraid to try something new because you will be amazed by what you can do. You are so capable of doing so many different things and learning so many different things and doing things just as well or even better than your male counterparts. Just because you are smaller or think a little bit differently about something, that doesn't mean that you are going to be inferior or lacking in anything. Who knows, you could be out there running jobs and running a company. You can do anything you want to, really. So, go out there and take the chance.

What is the pay like for a Steamfitter Apprentice?

When I joined the Steamfitter Union, I started off at about \$15.50 an hour but that was only for a few months and then it jumped up to about \$21 an hour. Now as a second year, I am at \$25.76 an hour. By the time I make journeyman, I am going to be making upwards of around \$46 an hour since Union bargaining is continuously resulting in raises, so very significant. In the Union, there is a chance for overtime, but it is maintained that you work an eight-hour workday and then you get your weekend and that's important to me. If you're working a weekend, the pay is time and a half and if you have to work a Sunday it's double time. The benefits are excellent—with local 601, we get a 401K, a great pension and for health benefits there is a clinic where our members get free care and prescriptions for themselves and family members. This is a solid career choice; it sets you up for success.



Tell us what you do as a Steamfitter Apprentice: What is a typical workday like? What is the work environment like? What do you wear on the job?

Right now, the job site that I am working on is for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and they are taking the old theater building in downtown Milwaukee and completely renovating the inside. We work with the hot water and chilled water system for the heating and the cooling of the building. So, we're running the big main pipes and all the small copper that runs to each individual unit and the fin tube elements that are going to be running throughout the towers. We connect the steam and the natural gas that comes into the building.

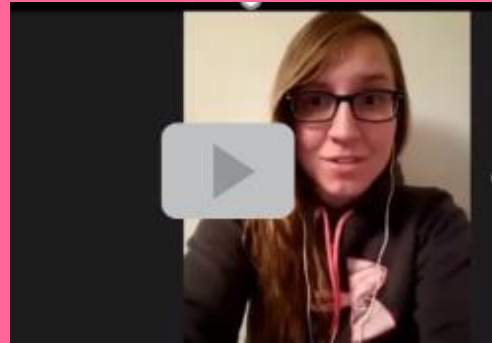
Job sites can range from three to over 40 workers—it depends on the job. My hours are 7:00 am to 3:30 pm, but it can be varied and altered.

General work attire—you wear a vest, hard hat, gloves, safety glasses, you have to wear steel toe boots. We are not allowed to wear the cut off t-shirts and it has to be long pants, no shorts. I have long hair and I wear a side braid to keep it from flying all over the place.

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What makes you successful in your work? What is your greatest professional accomplishment?

Obviously, welding is very important to me. Being a female getting into this trade, I thought the other workers on the job site were going to say that I am not very good at it, but I have heard from a few people that there has been some discussion that in fact I can weld pretty well. From what I have been told when I am not around and they are just sitting around talking—because of course I'm the new woman so they are talking about me—one of them mentioned, "Well, I heard that she can weld. Is that true?" and another welder from my company said, "Yes, she can weld pretty good." That is one of my biggest accomplishments and that's what I am most proud of.



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What challenges have you overcome? Are your friends and family supportive?

In general, everybody has been very supportive. My grandpa actually tried to help me get into a company that had their own welding program. Childcare can be a little bit difficult. My daughter's daycare opens up at 5:30 am, it's 25 minutes away and I start at the shop at 6:00 am. It's stressful in the mornings, but the people that I work with, they understand that I am a single parent and I can't change what time a daycare opens. I haven't got any grief about it. The rule of thumb is people generally like you to be there 15 minutes prior, I come in at 6:00 or a few minutes before 6:00 am. I consider that late, but it's actually on time.

Do you ever have any female company? What is it like working with mostly male co-workers? Have you encountered any problems because you are a woman, such as being given different job duties?

There is a woman that is in the copper shop back at the home base, but on the job site there is not another female Steamfitter. They are sprinkled very few and far between. There are six in the Union but there are more coming, which is nice to see. There is another female in the Apprenticeship classes, but we attend at different times. Recently, one or two females were indentured, so it's starting to grow. We like to stay in contact and occasionally will go out for dinner. I always have somebody to talk to.

I haven't had an issue working with men—back in the day it was a completely different mindset where I have heard stories it was difficult. I believe that there has been a huge culture change to where—yes, once I step on a job site people think about how they talk, or they think that they can't say this or that. There is a difference in demeanor, but I don't feel like I have been looked down upon or treated negatively for being a woman.

My foreman and coworkers are fully aware of my capabilities. I do think though there is sometimes a subconscious instinct to have a woman do the less heavy stuff. However, there have been times I had to pick up large heavy things and move them and I was doing more than the men that I was working with, which prompted them to do more.



Do you do any physical conditioning for your job? Do you ever have to do heavy lifting?

I am pretty short—5 foot 2 inches—but I'm muscular. I have an athletic build. I don't go to the gym. I work out at work. Honestly, I feel like what I did in the military and having to keep up with physical fitness has really helped me out and helped me develop a good baseline for muscle mass and the ability to handle the heavier work. If we can get a lift in there, then we use a lift. We try to use any mechanical means possible, but there are times when you do have to lift up heavier things over your head—such as hanging pipe on hangars. I feel like I may be small, but I should be able to lift at least a decent amount for the man or woman that I am working with because I can't be letting them down if it's just the two of us.

Did you prepare for the job interview process any differently as a woman? What did you wear? Any tips for other women?

Well, for the initial Apprenticeship interview I wore a pair of nice jeans and boots—not high heels—and a nice flannel shirt. That's what I thought was interview attire for a construction job, but I was the most overdressed person in the room because everybody else was in regular work jeans and t-shirts. Regarding the interview, I was going there because I was serious about being a Steamfitter otherwise, I wouldn't be there, and I wouldn't be going through the application process. I felt I had something to offer and was willing to learn and be good at it and if they didn't want to accept me, I would prove to them how I work and that would be that.

Do you have a mentor or role model?

I look to my older sister as a role model and mentor. She is an accountant—the totally opposite side of the spectrum—but she's inspirational to me.

Do you have any Certifications?

My fourth year of my Apprenticeship, I should be getting my UA-21 Pipe Welding Certification and then from then on if I want to get all of the other certifications that's on me to go and pursue.

What are your future goals for your career?

By the end of this Apprenticeship, I will be certified in Welding for the UA-21 that's what I primarily want to do—weld pipe either out in the field or in the shop—though I don't want that to be all I do. I still want to continue to keep learning all of the different aspects of what's offered as a Steamfitter.

How do you like to spend your time off?

Well, I really love music, so I am always listening to music. I recently got a banjo and the goal is to learn how to play it well. Besides that, my 5-year-old daughter is my life. She understands that I am a welder. I have actually gotten her to weld a few times and it was so exciting, I could have cried. I was so proud of her.



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