

Plumbing Apprenticeship Program, Local 38

Local 38's plumbing apprenticeship program began in the 1940s. Since then, the ratio of technical knowledge to physical skill has increased, explains instructor Dan McCormick, who has worked in the trade for 50 years, 25 as a plumber and 25 as a steam fitter. When he started, pipes were joined by ramming oakum into a joint and then pouring in molten lead. "Back then you had to really hustle to make 20 joints a day, but with the new materials, anyone can do 20 joints. And back then, you couldn't make mistakes. It had to be right the first time. Now if you make a mistake, you just unscrew it and re-do it."

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"I try to teach them where we came from," McCormick states. With the modern tools and techniques, joining pipes together takes little of the physical skill it once required, but knowing how to lay out a run to meet the specifications of today's complex and changing systems takes a lot of technical knowledge. "There is still a lot of manual work, but you won't make it just working with your hands. Now you have to spend some time in the office doing drawings."

Another difference: there was no OSHA in the 1940s. Plumbers didn't wear hard hats, and injuries from falls were common. Plumbers often lost fingers or got asbestosis from removing boiler insulation. Now, safe working procedures that follow OSHA standards are a big part of the training classes.

Keeping up with the technology and code changes, and then incorporating them into the curriculum, is one of Training Director Stephen Mazzola's biggest challenges. Mazzola attended the program in 1990. "In high school I had no idea what I wanted to be," he says. Even though he came from a family of plumbers, he wasn't sure about going into the trade. But after high school, he was lured by the promise of being able to say, "I built that." "I figured college wasn't for me, but what I didn't realize was how much school work it would take right here."

The change to green technology offers both excitement and challenges. "We need to preserve the environment for our kids and stay in the forefront of the trade," Mazzola explains. "Our members have been effectively doing green building in heating, ventilation, and air conditioning for years. We've only recently been recognized for it." As an example, he cites the recent change to high-efficiency furnace pumps with refrigerant recovery systems that use a new refrigerant that is less harmful to the environment. However, the systems use higher pressure and require a different type of pipe, and that means teaching plumbers the new specifications and code requirements.

The apprenticeship program requires no previous training. Although most of the apprentices are in their 20s, just out of high school, it is open to people of all ages. "In our last group, we saw a lot of college graduates," says Mazzola. "We had one apprentice who was close to 60 years old. When I attended the program, we had someone at retirement age who was trying to get a second pension."

The program offers apprenticeships in plumbing, steam and pipe fitting, and heating and ventilation. About 300 apprentices are enrolled in the five-year program, which turns out about 25 to 75 journeymen a year. Apprentices work during the day and attend school at the center at night. Applicants are screened for proper work attitude, which results in relatively few dropouts.

Organized Labor spoke with some of the apprentices, all of whom were enthusiastic about beginning their new careers.

Leslie Clough

Apprentice Leslie Clough, 43 years old, worked as a legal secretary for 20 years. "I just got sick of sitting in a cubicle year after year pounding at the computer. This is a lot more challenging and a lot more interesting," she states. She enjoys the variety. "One day you may be soldering copper pipe, another day doing layout, and another day helping with a cast-iron pipe delivery. There is a lot of moving around. The other day we were up on the roof taking measurements in the rain. It was fun being outside and learning something new." How is it being a woman in the trades? "It's great," she says. "Most of the plumbers are really helpful. They are all real professional and respectful. Occasionally you come across a gruff plumber, so you leave him alone and keep on going." And how does that compare to working with attorneys? "It's a lot more enjoyable than all the pressure of working for people who make their living fighting with other people."

Conor Comyns

Apprentice Conor Comyns's father is a dentist, but going to school wasn't for him.

"I started doing custom kitchens and bathrooms until I was running a cabinet shop. I was making \$22 an hour with no benefits and had a child on the way, so I decided I needed something better for myself, like guaranteed health benefits and a pension. My buddy told me they were giving a test in San Francisco for plumbers, and I was lucky enough to make it. I like the mechanics and working with my hands, and it gives me the opportunity to be in the city. I get to work on some really cool buildings that I wouldn't be able to get into otherwise."

Dan McCormick

McCormick, now over 70 years old, muses about all the changes he has seen since he attended the Local 38 apprenticeship program in the 1950s. He started working at 16, and back then he couldn't imagine someone drifting from one occupation to another. His father was an Irish immigrant who came to America at 19, during the depression, and worked as an indentured servant to pay off the cost of his ticket.

"Everyone in our home worked," says McCormick. "I remember thinking at the time what a big deal it was for me to get a trade. At that time most of the Irish were laborers and that was pretty much it. My family was so happy that I made it. They were as excited back then as I was when my daughter got into Harvard. She is now a labor lawyer." His other daughter graduated from Vassar and works for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. His son is another instructor at the program. He is proud that he succeeded in raising them with a strong work ethic and to be pro-union.

In addition to the apprentice program, the training center offers upgrade training to journeymen in areas such as backflow certification for water supply systems and medical gas certification for installing medical gas piping in hospital surgical rooms. They also offer programs in AutoCAD and other computer-assisted drawing programs used in the trade.

Brian Keating

Brian Keating: "My grandfather retired from Local 38, and my uncle got me in the trade. I worked for a while driving a tow truck: low wages, no pay, no benefits, no future. I could see how my grandfather and the rest of my family were living, and I wanted to provide the same for my son. You get to work with your hands, do honest work, and put things together."

Maria Bowden

"I'm related to a lot of people here. Valadez is my maiden name. We're a family of steamfitters and plumbers, Local 38. I've been doing this my whole life. This is what my parents raised me to do. They would take me along on remodeling jobs, and at home my grandfather was in the garage welding. That's what we do. The hardest thing is waiting to be turned out. I am aspiring to hold up the family name, the same as my father and brothers. I'm doing plumbing right now, and maybe later I'll get into steam fitting."

Clint Delbonta

"Grandfather plumber, dad plumber, me plumber. The program is awesome, intellectually stimulating. You get to come here twice a week to this fine facility, kickback for a couple hours a week, and learn the trade. I'm a hands-on guy. I can't sit at the desk and type."

Bob Walker

Apprentice Bob Walker has also tried many other occupations. At 51, he's "old enough to be some of these kids' granddads." He has a nursing background and worked with the physically and mentally handicapped. The last few years, he was the driver for a plumbing company. Then he decided to become a plumber. "I like learning new stuff. It's back-breaking work, but I have no regrets. I really like it. It's a great career," he says.

Anna Digrande

Anna Digrande, Apprentice, her folks own a restaurant.

"I was doing security and had friends in the trade. I saw their paychecks and I was amazed. It's been good

to finally learn math. It was never big for me, but now I'm on the job doing the math and wow I learned it.

Three Apprentices

Ron Wells (left)

Being a plumber is great. It's hard work, it's physical, but and you get to meet a lot of different people and learn a lot about the trade. I couldn't do without the program. I used to be supervisor for Federal Express, this is a lot more difficult but it's also a lot more fulfilling. You feel like you're part of something after every build you work on; you can go back and feel a sense of accomplishment. Learning the math and drawing challenging but I'm getting through it.

Pat Summy (middle)

The best part is the paycheck, the hardest part is showing up to work. This is fun, putting the pipes together.

Jay Powell (right)

I went to culinary school for two years but decided I didn't want to be a chef. Plumbing is a good time, you feel a sense of the accomplishment. You get to look back and say I did the plumbing on that building. The hardest part for me is commuting from Santa Rosa.