

## A construction site where it's OK to 'ask and learn'

In California, a nonprofit helps women and nonbinary people gain skills and confidence. It's part of a growing effort to demystify an industry still largely associated with men.

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As part of a Dykes With Drills workshop series, founder Julie Peri, left, provides carpentry lessons to Sarah Nelson in January at the Youth Spirit Artworks' Tiny House Village in East Oakland, California. (Photo by Katie Lauer)



Written By Katie Lauer *Featured Writer*

### Did You Know?

Julie Peri spent the early days of 2021 explaining how to avoid losing fingers to a circular saw, and answering questions through the din of an air compressor and muffle of her sawdust-covered face mask.

At a job site behind the RingCentral Coliseum in Oakland, California, Peri and six other women were finishing the last of 26 tiny homes – 100-square-foot structures with room for necessities such as a single bed, small desk and a few shelves – slated for young people without housing.

A residential carpenter by trade, Peri runs [Dykes With Drills](#), a Bay Area nonprofit founded in January 2018 to introduce more women and nonbinary people to the joy and community within construction.

“Even if it’s a small bookshelf, bedside table or the wall of a tiny house, once it’s in place, there’s a true sense of accomplishment,” Peri said. “There’s plenty of things you could do on a computer, but I think there’s something about seeing that final product and your progress that is so satisfying.”

But how do women and nonbinary folks muster the confidence to dive into the trades if they don’t know how to use a nail gun? Dykes With Drills works to carve out a path for those yearning to learn without committing to apprenticeships or full-time educational programs.



Jessica Earle, left, and Sarah Nelsen work inside a 100-square-foot tiny home in East Oakland, California, as part of a Dykes With Drills workshop on Jan. 3, 2021. (Photo by Katie Lauer)

“We’re focused on teaching, unlike the construction industry, which is focused on doing the job quickly, doing it well, minimizing costs and making a profit,” Peri said. “There’re so many places that are still not failure positive or failure safe.”

Women’s representation in the construction industry has historically paled in comparison to men, as blue-collar work typically isn’t viewed as something [women are capable of performing](#). Without equitable access to power tools and inroads to the industry – physically, socially or financially – many women never enter the market, even if they are interested in doing so.

Despite record employment numbers in 2018, women only accounted for [3.4% of all construction trade](#) workers – less than one in 20. However, when factoring in administrative and office staff positions, women make up 9.9% of the construction industry nationwide.

Peri’s efforts to bring more women into the trades isn’t novel. Organizations similar to Peri’s include Move Over Bob, Generation T and Nontraditional Employment for Women. And there are online bulletin boards filled with tips, trick and vent sessions about [microaggressions and “mansplaining.”](#)

“More women are realizing there’s good money here, and they’re realizing it’s a job they can, in fact, do,” Peri said. “They don’t have to have this fear of, ‘I am not supposed to do this or I can’t do it.’ Those false beliefs are shifting, but I think it’s (the shift) still happening rather slowly.”

That shift stems from demystifying everything from drywall and trim installation to site etiquette and contractor relationships. These niche, local wood shops and “maker spaces,” popping up in cities such as Los Angeles, Boston, and Chicago, are helping women foster confidence and connection to the industry in ways that aren’t always available elsewhere. These challenges exist even for women already working in construction.

San Francisco project engineer Sarah Nelson has been fascinated by the process of building. Legos were on her wish lists every birthday and Christmas. Without female representation in positions, such as superintendents, and without the hands-on experiences, she took the “easier” route at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.

In college, she studied technical aspects of the work, such as managing schedule timelines and financial risks. “It’s super weird, because now thinking back on it, my favorite class in school was residential construction, where we actually built tiny homes,” Nelson said. “I think what it came down to was confidence, and I felt like it was more common for women to do the project management side instead of the field side.”

Nelson represents the [72% of women within construction](#) who work in the sales, office, professional and management sectors of the building industry. Even though the 24 year old is already physically on job sites, she turned to Dykes With Drills to comfortably reacquaint herself with building.

“I have a great team, but part of me is scared to ask questions because it feels like I should already know the answer by now,” she said, describing work’s typically male-dominated spaces and macho atmosphere. “Here, I feel more empowered to ask and learn.”

Unanswered questions about the industry leave a backlog of women willing to wield the tools of the trade, but wary about reaching for them.

No one ever mentioned the trades in high school to Jessica Earle, who remembers hearing about white-collar careers. But a year ago, Earle, now a lawyer in the Bay Area, called Peri after stumbling upon Dykes With Drills.

Earle was elated about finding a supportive space to learn new skills. “I think the big thing that’s been amazing is working with women, in the broadest sense,” Earle said about working on the tiny houses. “It’s tough to learn new skills, especially in something you’re not comfortable with. So finding a safe place with Julie – her whole ethos is about learning from mistakes – and other people who are supportive has been a game changer.

“This is a gross generalization, but I think women are a little more collaborative. In this space, we seem to figure things out together,” Earle said. “Knowing it’s been an all-woman crew for these (tiny homes), we still got the job done. It’s been a confidence builder to affirm we’re not helpless just because we’re women.”