



# Industry

# Women

## Giving and Getting the Business

By Wendy Levine

If you remember back to the days when Josephine the Plumber prowled the airwaves as a symbol of what was then called, “Women’s Lib,” you may be surprised to find how few actual women have followed in her imaginary footsteps since Jane Withers started hawking Comet Cleanser as that character in the 1960s.

Even a quick look through *Reeves Journal’s* back issues shows women mostly appeared as window dressing. That’s not the case any more.

What follows are stories of several women who have made lucrative—and sometimes powerful—careers for themselves in the plumbing industry. But females in the plumbing industry remain scarce, and many of them got into it by accident, or by tragedy, through the death of a relative who owned the business.

### Charlotte Glass

That’s how it happened for Charlotte Glass, owner, with her two sons, of Love Field Plumbing in Dallas.

Shortly after marrying Butch Glass in 1968, she and her new husband purchased Love Field Plumbing. Glass spent most of her time doing customer service and dispatching employees. But even in the relative safety of an office, Glass quickly learned what it meant to be a woman in a male dominated business.

“I found that it was difficult to walk that line as a woman,” Glass said. “I learned that if you come off too hard, you are a ‘B.’ And if you are too easy, well, you get run over.” Glass adopted a strategy of diplomacy and tact: “I never reprimanded an employee in front of another but would take them aside and speak to them like I was trying to get answers because, after all, I just want to understand why something happened.”

Glass may not have gone out on service calls, but she wasn’t under wraps either. She served on the City of Dallas Building Inspection and Appeals Board for more than a decade. She claimed she lacked the proper experience at the time, but she found out later

it was her female viewpoint the board wanted. “Of course, after every meeting, I’d come back and go over everything with my husband so I could be sure I was ‘thinking’ correctly for our industry.”

And Glass has only praise for her industry colleagues. “I found my fellow contractors to be most supportive of me as a woman,” Glass said. “When they recognize that you know a little about the plumbing business world and are truthful with them, they in turn give the same respect and truth back. I have always treated my competitors as ‘being the in same boat’ with me. We all go through the same challenges—the new word for problems.”

Today Glass is semi-retired, leaving the day-to-day duties to her two sons and her brother-in-law. After 40 years in the business, does she recommend the industry to other women? Not without hands-on training and a strong man to back her up. “Being a woman on a job site is not for the faint of heart,” Glass said. “Let’s face it—some things cannot be politically correct—and a job site is one of them. Dispatching and customer service and accounting are generally women’s jobs in this industry. I still believe it’s a man’s world and that doesn’t diminish me in the least.”

### Zan Scomodau

She is the third woman in Washington State to get into the plumbers union, but that’s not why Zan Scomodau is something of

Zan of Zan’s Plumbing in Seattle, makes no bones about her “Rad Dyke” ad in *The Stranger*. Photo by Victoria Renard.



a celebrity. The outspoken owner of Zan's Plumbing in Seattle is known (sometimes affectionately) for her long-running advertisements in the local arts newspapers as the "Rad Dyke Plumber."

Some prospective customers are surely put off by the moniker. That's the idea, Scommodau said. "Because I was tired of people saying, 'a woman plumber?' So it weeded out all the [expletive] idiots. I'm a tomboy," she said. "What better job for a tomboy than tinker toys?"

Scommodau had 13 years' experience working for others before she started Zan's Plumbing in 1992. She's glad to be on her own and not have to answer that age-old question: Why did she want to be a plumber? When a co-worker posed the question years ago, Scommodau said she turned it around, asking the man, "Well, why did *you*?"

"And this guy was scowling at me when he said it and he said, 'I didn't want to be a plumber.' And I said, 'Well, I feel sorry for you then.'"

Yes, Scommodau enjoys her work but she chose the field for practical reasons. "I was not going to get an inheritance," Scommodau said. "I don't come from a rich background. And anything I got in this world I was going to have to make myself." Growing up in San Diego as a foster kid in 10 different homes, Scommodau didn't expect anything to be easy, and it hasn't been.

"It was war then and it's war now," Scommodau said. "The general attitude of men is that women don't belong in plumbing."

The 1980s were tough and she had trouble staying employed. "I wasn't always the *first* one laid off...but sooner or later there's the good ol' boy network that work all year long," she said. She stayed busy during those periods doing small jobs more experienced professionals wouldn't. And she got a good education along the way.

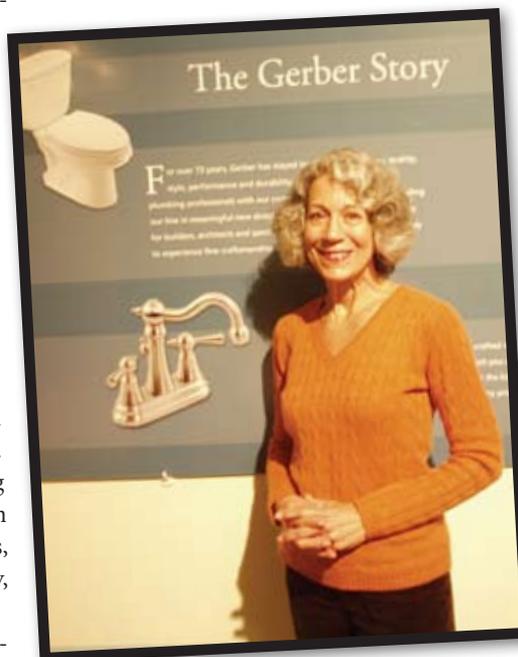
Scommodau has quelled any thoughts of expanding. "I could have a really big business now but someone said to me, 'Stay small and keep it all.' I get to work whenever I want to work now. Why would I mess that up?"

Though Scommodau admits plumbing has given her the life she wants to have, she cautioned women considering the field, "They have to know they're in for a fight."

She advises a three-year rather than a five-year license. But first, find the right fit. "If you can find a company that's got a good attitude towards you when you come ask for an application," said Scommodau, "your chances are pretty good that you'll do well."

## Ila Lewis

Ila Lewis' business card reads, "Chairman of the Board," as did her mother's before her. "I got into the plumbing business the old fashioned way," Lewis said. "I was born into it."



**Ila Lewis, Gerber Plumbing's Chairman of the Board said she was born into the plumbing business. Photo courtesy Gerber Plumbing.**

Her grandfather, Max Gerber, founded Gerber Plumbing Fixtures Corp., near Chicago, in 1932. "Discussions about plumbing and all associated with the industry were common around the dinner table," Lewis said. She never imagined herself being a part of it but, as often happens with family-run compa-

nies, she was pulled in after Max died and her mother and uncle inherited the business.

Perhaps because her mother was at the helm, Lewis said she was mostly spared the estrangement women commonly feel in such a male-dominated industry. "That's not to say that the 'old boys' club' mentality does not exist. I have actually experienced it up close and personal but have not let it have an effect on where I was or what I was doing. I have always considered that behavior the problem of those displaying it."

Though she has seen many changes in her 27 years in the industry, Lewis said what hasn't changed is the important role relationships play.

"There is no guarantee that I would ever have found another career in which I would have had such meaningful experiences, met such terrific people, felt a part of something that has an important impact on peoples' lives—not only in the area of hygiene, but now, also, the environment—and felt so good about at the end of each day."

## Melina Harris

If you're looking for women in construction, you might try the state of Washington, where the nonprofit Sisters in the Building Trades was created in 2005. President Melina Harris said the idea was to have an organization for women similar to those in California, Alaska and the Northeast.

The organization works to increase public awareness of careers in the industry, expand the network of women in the trades, and offer support and mentoring. "We now have 50 mentors and are planning our first mentor training for the first week of April," said Harris, who works for Custom Interiors in Seattle.

Harris has noticed that men and women work differently: "Women have a different

### HED: Stat-O-Matic

- Wyotech Technical Institute in Long Beach offers classes in plumbing but no women are currently enrolled.
- Arizona Department of Corrections was providing female inmates at the Perryville Prison with plumbing training but the program has been discontinued.
- According to the U.S. Department of Labor report on non-traditional occupations for women, there were 662,000 people in 2006 working as pipelayers, pipefitters, plumbers and steamfitters. Of those, women totaled 12,000, or 1.8 percent—a lower ratio than 20 years earlier.

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center of gravity,” she said. “They learn different ways to use things—different tools, different habits—because your average tool isn’t meant for a woman’s hand or arm or our body balance.”

Even positioning. “Women sit, men kneel,” Harris said, so men need kneepads and women are already...padded. “And they’re not going to have the testosterone needing thing [of], ‘I

can lift that,’” she added. “They’re going to go get a forklift or a dolly or a jack to pick it up if it’s too heavy, which is what all of the agencies for safety have been recommending because of all of the injuries.”

Harris contends that women get *in* to the business at a pretty good rate, they just don’t stay.

“They feel terribly uncomfortable. ‘There’s 20 guys and me. Oh, *shit!*,’” she said. Then there’s the burden of representing the whole gender. “I’m not allowed to make a mistake on the job and all the guys are,” Harris said. “They could cut 3,000 things wrong; I make one miscut, they pin it to the wall and put my name on it.” And, she said, word spreads. “Everybody in the building is watching because they know where the women are. There’s only two on the job site. It’s like being a purple monkey. And so there’s a lot of intense pressure with that.”

Harris is the first woman her company has hired in 10 years. “Women in the trades are still rare. I’m a carpenter. I have *never* worked with another [female journeyman] carpenter on a



**Nancy Jones is executive director of the Texas chapter of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association, a group with a healthy representation of women. Photo courtesy of PHCC.**

job,” she said. Nevertheless, Harris concluded that when women succeed, they do enjoy the work. “They are good paying jobs with family benefits and women are quite capable of them.”

### Nancy Jones

The woman plumber on the truck remains a rarity, but the gender is rather well represented on the association side. Jo Wag-



**Sisters in the Building Trades president Melina Harris on a remodeling job at Safeco Plaza in downtown Seattle. Photo courtesy of Melina Harris.**



**Barbara Higgens, executive director of PMI, rarely thinks about being a minority in a male-dominated industry. Photo courtesy of PMI.**

ner recently completed her term as PHCC's (second female) president, for example. And a woman currently heads the busy PHCC-Texas chapter in Austin. Executive director Nancy Jones, who has worked in association management since 1984, said she's always been treated with respect. "Our contractors are some of the nicest, most courteous men I have ever met."

Jones has noticed an influx of younger people entering the field but is working to attract more women. "We are starting a new state apprentice program this spring—a whole new approach to apprenticeship training that will entice more young people to participate."

The former teacher speculated on why there aren't more females coming in. "Women don't realize that they CAN perform this work if they are strong and have good technical skills," Jones said. "It's been a man's industry for so long, it will take time to educate young people, especially women, about our industry."

### Barbara Higgens

Barbara Higgens was used to a mostly male workplace even before she got into the trades. Higgens was director of marketing for defense contractor Raytheon when she was approached ten years ago about taking over management of the Plumbing Manufacturers Institute in Rolling Meadows, Ill. "I thought, 'Well, shoot, I'm not interested in plumbing,' and the headhunter's comment was, 'Well, that's good because they never would have hired a woman anyway.' He actually said that in 1998, which is a little bizarre."

Though Higgens said the man was half-kidding, that was all the encouragement she needed.

When the competition was down to her and three other candidates, management was

hardly gender-blind. "One of our board members described that they had: someone who had run a trade association, a lawyer, someone from the plumbing industry and a woman," she said. "So it wasn't that I had any marketing capabilities or communication strengths—it was the fact that I was a woman."

Still, Higgens gives the board credit for giving her support. "If they were at all hesitant to have me at the helm, they've really given me a lot of flexibility and latitude to do the things that we needed to do."

Recently, Higgens has delved deeper into the issues affecting the industry and PMI members. "We introduced legislation last year to mandate high efficiency toilets. I'm not sure how that

would have flown 10 years ago, nor do I think that I would have driven that," Higgens said. "So I think we grow together but I don't ever remember a time where I suggested something [and] they kind of rolled their eyes and patted me on the head and told me to go away. I think they were really ready for change at the time that they brought me on board so that's what we did."

Unlike the board that hired her, Higgens said she doesn't usually think of herself as the only woman until it's pointed out. "Way back when I was at a meeting of the Electronic Industries Association, a fellow came up to me and called me by name and said it was good to see me again. I was so impressed that he had remembered my name. Well, I *was* the only woman in the room." ■

#### Here are some places to find and/or learn about women in the industry:

- WomenWork.org (national network for women's employment)
- Sisters in the Building Trades.org (Washington based networking and mentoring)
- BeJane.com (home improvement community for DIY-women)
- The Center for Women's Business Research ([www.cfwbbr.org](http://www.cfwbbr.org))
- Women's Business Enterprise National Council ([www.wbenc.org](http://www.wbenc.org))