

Kathy Kelly

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Kathy Kelly had worked at the same bank for 11 years. She was overseeing 23 branches and training people to do similar jobs, but, because she didn't have a college degree, she was only making $11.50 an hour without the possibility of getting a raise. "I have 3 children, and my ex-husband doesn't pay child support," she says. "It was hard to support myself and my kids on that." On a break one day she read an article in the newspaper about a woman in a similar situation who turned her life around by going to Chicago Women in Trades. "I remember saying 'wow, good for her,' and I tore the article out with the number." Kathy went to an information session at Chicago Women in Trades and decided to attend the program on nights and weekends. As graduation neared, she chose bricklaying as the trade she would specialize in and was accepted into the 12-week pre-job training program. It wasn't until after graduating from CWIT that the fear sank in. "All of a sudden I was faced with having to quit my job," she explains. "I knew it wasn't going anywhere, we were living hand to mouth, but it was a constant. I was going to be walking away from my insurance and my job and I didn't know how we would get by during that 12 weeks." Kathy decided to take the leap of faith. She discovered that she could apply for a no-interest loan through Chicago Women in Trades to help her with finances during the training. With this assitance, Kathy was able to focus on school and she finished the program at the top of her class. She started as a bricklayer making $16 an hour, and in just a year and a half, her salary has increased to $23.28 an hour. More importantly, Kathy loves the work. "It's very rewarding. I like putting up walls. I get a lot of satisfaction out of knowing that my children can tell their kids 'you're grandmother pulled some of that brick on that building.'" Kathy has also been able to do something she never thought would be possible: buying a house. "My kids are so excited. It's the American dream. I can absolutely say that Chicago Women in Trades has totally, 100 percent turned my life around."

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Lucy Loza truly was a 'Jill of all trades.' In the 1980s, she worked making wallpaper. Her next job was at an aluminum company where she was a roll operator. Later, she worked for one of the biggest chemical companies in North America as both a chemical operator and a fire brigade member. When the branch she worked for shut down, she decided to take a risk and open her own bar and grill, but she says she always dreamed about getting into construction. "I was running the bar all by myself," she explains, "and I was burned out, so I sold the business and took a couple of months off. That's when I decided to go for my dream and get into the trades." Lucy heard about Chicago Women in Trades when she applied for a job with the plumber's union. "They recommended I give them a call, and, believe me, it's the best advice I've gotten in my whole life." Lucy was accepted into the Chicago Women in Trades training program, and, after getting a taste of all the trades, she decided she wanted to become a carpenter. In 2005, 46 year-old Lucy graduated from the program, completed her apprentice training program in carpentry, and realized a life-long dream. "Chicago Women in Trades is the best lifeline I've ever gotten. They are always there for me when I have questions or need advice. I'm a very resourceful person," she says, "but I don't think I would be where I am today if it wasn't for Chicago Women in Trades."

Lucy Loza

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Alicia Backus

Alicia Backus was working two jobs as a server at two different restaurants when she walked past a number of construction sites in downtown Chicago. "I had been thinking about switching careers. I wanted something that would give me some financial stability, a pension and benefits. I saw the tradespeople working there, but I didn't know what avenue to take to get into the field," says Alicia. It wasn't until later when she overheard some people talking about Chicago Women in Trades on a bus that she decided to really give it a try. "I was eavesdropping," she laughs, "and I wrote the information down about the program. Later a good friend of mine told me she was going to a CWIT information session, and I was like, 'wow, I need to do this.'" The program prepared Alicia so well that when she decided to take the aptitude test to become an ironworker, she ranked 77th out of 1,300 entrants. "CWIT absolutely prepares you for success," says Alicia, who has worked building additions to McCormick Place. "Right now I'm really enjoying what I do. I feel confident and strong, and I'm able to pay my bills. In the past, it was just more of scraping by. I had more of a feeling of barely keeping my head above water. And now it's like, okay, the water is to my knees now!" Alicia hopes to have enough money within the next year to put a down payment on a home in Jamaica, but is clear that her new career is about more than just the money. "I was really inspired at work the other day," she says. "There were five women in my vicinity working and they each represented a different trade. It was wonderful just to see that."