

BREAKING THE MOLD

October 2014

Part 7

NORTHERN MAINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE RECOGNIZES STUDENTS IN NON-TRADITIONAL PROGRAMS

Julie Carney of Ashland is a senior in the electrical construction and maintenance program at NMCC. Julie developed an interest in the electrical field when she was a teenager. Julie's father, an inspector and former business owner, taught Julie and her four sisters how to do small repairs and install lights. Her curiosity grew, as she wondered how certain devices worked, and quickly excelled at hooking up televisions, fixing radios, and working with computers. She later considered joining the military to study electrical construction. However, her plans were put on hold when she became a mother. During this time, Julie raised her children while working as a disc jockey and holding jobs in banking and office management. Although she enjoyed the customer service aspect of her jobs, Julie later realized that it was time for a career change. "I wanted something challenging that I wouldn't get bored with. I wanted variety." After much thought and consideration, Julie decided to trade in her dress clothes and high heels for a tool belt and a pair of work boots.

In the beginning, Julie had reservations about attending college to study electrical construction and maintenance because of her gender and age. Having support from her family motivated her to follow her dreams. "My husband has been my cheerleader. He encouraged me to go back to school." Julie also decided to attend college for her two daughters. "I want to be a role model to my children." Julie chose NMCC because she has friends who completed the program and they spoke highly of the instructors. The affordable tuition was also a deciding factor. In fact, Julie has received scholarships for being a female in a non-traditional program. Julie is very appreciative of the financial assistance she received to attend NMCC.

When Julie started the program, she admits that being the only female was somewhat intimidating. "At first, I felt alone. But being on my own helped me stay focused." Getting to know her classmates was a challenge, but as Julie progressed through the program, she built friendships with her peers and relationships with her instructors. Julie is comfortable being in a program that is predominantly male because she has several male friends. "I get along well with males. I'm

not a tomboy. I like to wear makeup and do my hair. But I'm also not afraid to get my hands dirty."

Julie notes that working in a trade or technical career may not be for some females. "If you're easily offended, you won't make it far. You have to be tough and speak up." If an inappropriate comment is made by a peer, Julie says something. "I remind them that it's not okay and that they need to watch what they say. They need to get used to the fact that females are in this field, and that a female may be their co-worker or boss someday."



Photo: Julie in the Electrical Construction & Maintenance Lab at NMCC.

Julie has a strong desire to learn. To increase her knowledge and help prepare her for more advanced courses, Julie took additional math classes that weren't required for her degree. Her computer knowledge and past experiences working with technology have also helped her succeed in her classes.

Julie is confident in her abilities. However, because gender stereotypes still exist, female electricians are often faced with challenges. For example, Julie recently applied for a job with a local contractor. A male friend with the same amount of education as Julie but less experience applied for the same position. She later found out that her friend got the job. "What most people don't realize is that hiring women is good for business." In addition, when Julie submitted her application, an employee asked her personal information, including her age and the ages of her children. Although she was disappointed that she didn't get the job, this experience will not stop her from applying for jobs in

the future. Another concern is the availability of personal protective equipment for women. “Women’s work boots are difficult to find and men’s boots are too big.” Also, the size and weight of some of the tools puts a strain on Julie’s wrists and hands.

Being an electrician requires physical strength and being in optimal health. Therefore, Julie quit smoking, maintains a healthy diet, and exercises regularly. Julie has found that by living a healthier lifestyle, her sleeping habits and organizational skills have improved, which has contributed to her success as a student.



Julie plans to graduate in May of 2015. In regards to employment, Julie is keeping her options open, stating that there is a lot one can do in the electrical field. “The possibilities are endless. I am open to any opportunity that comes my way, whether it’s working in a factory or at a mill. I want to get a lot of experience and get my hands on everything.” Within the next three years, Julie hopes to earn her journeyman’s license. Julie has a strong interest in programmable logic controllers, or PLCs, which are used in most industries. Julie has already started putting her skills to good use, replacing receptacles and faulty wiring at her own house. By practicing at home, she has been able to apply what she has learned at NMCC in a real-world setting.

Julie offers strategies for success at NMCC, including building relationships with instructors and utilizing resources on campus such as the Academic Success Center. Julie has found that participating in a study group has been very helpful and advises students to form a study group when classes start. Julie also urges students not to give up if they don’t understand a subject right away. “Just keep going, don’t quit after one poor grade. It’s okay to make mistakes. I had my

struggles, but I made it through. Go to class, do your work, and try.” If a student is undecided about a career, Julie recommends job shadowing to get a better understanding of what the job entails.

Julie offers advice for females considering a career in electrical construction and maintenance. “Just go for it. If you have an interest, why not do what you like rather than what is expected of you?” Julie warns that it may not be easy at first. “Be prepared for a challenge. You will definitely surprise yourself. When you fix something and make it work, it is very rewarding.” Julie is enthusiastic about starting her career. “This is the only field I can see myself working in.”

**Quick Facts:
Electrician**

Job Duties: Test and inspect electrical systems, plan layout and installation of electrical wiring, equipment, or fixtures, connect wires to circuit breakers or other components, diagnose malfunctioning systems.

Skills Needed: Troubleshooting, complex problem solving, critical thinking, and active learning.

2013 National Average Pay: \$24.28/hour; \$50,510/year

Job Outlook: Projected to grow 20% between 2012-2022

Percentage of NMCC 2013 Electrical Construction and Maintenance Graduates Employed in the Field: 43%

For more information about non-traditional programs available at NMCC, please contact Lori Smith, Student Support Career Specialist at 768-2793 or nlosmith@nmcc.edu



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