

Above All a Tradeswoman

Authors Preface

By Chris L. Belec-Joannette

My journey had always been to be a carpenter. I expected not only a challenging job but also the chance to be part of a historic transformation, social and economic, that would make the construction trades accessible to women. That transformation did not happen until years after I started with affirmative action laws.

It includes my many jobs I had along the way, teaching myself to become a carpenter. I knew no one in my family who were in the trades. Nor did they have any friends that were. My mother's family Helene' came from Canada. She was one of my first role models for hard work. And I loved her dearly! But I left home at 18 years old to pursue my dreams.

I knew that it would be difficult, because I never heard of a female carpenter anywhere at my young age of 18. It was exceedingly difficult trying to find work in an all-male oriented construction industry. But my story tells all.

Even my family thought I was crazy for dropping out of college to pursue this kind of career. I was awarded scholarships in physical education and music at the University of Chicago.

There were many angry and frustrating days along my journey to success, and I sometimes took it out on the people around me. But all in all, it made me tuff for what was to come.

It was always puzzling to me also as to why I was so passionate about becoming a carpenter, but I knew I would love it because I liked working with my hands, building things and being outside. The cold never bothered me, but the heat did.

I found out later in life that it had to be biological even though no one in my family had been in trade in the United States. When I found my biological parents in Canada, I found out almost every family member was in a trade. Including an uncle who owned one of the largest commercial contracting companies in Montreal, Quebec, called "Celeb Construction Company". My last name spelled backwards Belec.

My name was shortened from Joannette to Joanet in the United States. Then when I found out the parents that raised me where not my real parents. I found out my biological parents sur name was Belec.

I however did not find any of this out until I was almost 60 years old.

My journey took me to places and things I never dreamed I would be doing. Including fighting for the right to be carpenter as a woman thru-out the 1970's. I found out that

gender barriers were are deeply embedded in the organizations like unions and the culture of the construction workplace.

I have always been self-educated. I have written many articles online for equal rights. Developed several websites and I have owned businesses and managed construction jobsites. Including joining many other organizations along the way.

I currently live in Montreal, Quebec, Canada where I retired in 2018. Canada wanted me to use my adoptive parents surname so now it is Chris L. Joannette. I decided not to use my biological parents' surname Belec officially, even though it is my biological name.

My story tells the rest.

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A Journey of a Woman Becoming a Carpenter

Chapter 1 – The Beginning

I was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada on October 16, 1948. Brought to the United States when I was one year old. My father Ray was a truck driver in Canada and would travel back and forth from Canada to the United States. I remember traveling in his truck at a young age with my mother Helene, we traveled across the United States a lot. Landed in Chicago, Illinois where I lived for 69 years. I was told by my mother and father from a young age that my mother Helene and I were born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, but my father Ray was born in Providence, Rhode Island, that is why I was a U.S. citizen. This will become relevant later in my story.

I can remember at a noticeably young age always trying to build things out of everything and anything I could find. Usually, it would turn out a mess...

In High School I wanted to take classes like ROTC and Shop. But the counselors always said no because girls could not take those classes, only boys could take those classes. I would get angry and usually say something nasty to the counselor and then was reprimanded and or suspended from school. I also had many questions about what I was being taught, like always asking why... and then reprimanded for asking and told to just follow the lesson plan.

After school I would work part time doing anything I could find to help my mother with our big family. My father had left us in 1963 the day his last daughter was born, and my mother had to take care of six girls, I was the oldest. I did work part-time for St-Jude Foundation after school.

My mother was my role model in life, I loved her dearly. But I moved out of our family home when I was eighteen years old in 1967 a few months after my graduation from high school. My mother was getting ready to get married again. His name was Frank and he said he would move all my sisters to his house and take care of them.

Chapter 2 - Secret History of the Word Queer

You are probably wondering why I made this my second chapter? I found this article online while writing my story and it was exactly what I have gone through my entire life. Even today in the 21st Century! Hate does not stop because of the year.

‘Queer’. It is a term I encountered occasionally throughout my adolescence, always as an insult, a slur. It is a word that was shouted angrily at me on the street, a mark of disrespect used to goad me into arguments in nightclubs and, most frequently, a term spat in disgust whenever I indulged in public displays of affection. I understood it as a word designed to make me ashamed not only of my homosexuality but of my voice, my appearance, and my behavior; I grew up believing that ‘queer’ was a term used only to express hatred, anger, and prejudice.

This is not, of course, the truth, and I learned this later in life – as I grew older, I discovered queercore, queer theory and shows like Queer as Folk which introduced me to a broader context. The origins of the word itself are dubious but what we know for sure is that ‘queer’ first entered the English language in the 16th century. Its original meaning was ‘strange’ or ‘peculiar’ – hence the idiom “there’s now so queer as folk”. Now, however, it is more commonly used to describe non-normative identities with regards to both gender and sexuality; it is an umbrella term used to define a spectrum of marginalized identities ranging from white gay men to asexual non-binary black individuals or anyone that does not fit that person’s NORM. Still, many remain reluctant to classify themselves as queer or discuss queer identities due to the word’s checkered history. ‘Queer’ has been decried, reclaimed, and decried once again over the last few centuries; is it still – and should it be – a dirty word?

I have had to live with this all my personal and business life. It was most aggressive working around the men on a construction site. Thus, way I loved working by myself. I did meet some carpenters that were tolerant of how I looked. And we became friends.

I would like to tell you a little about the Origins of the word “Queer” as a slur.

John Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry (yes, that is seriously his title) gave us the first recorded written example of queer as a slur back in 1894. Douglas had discovered his son was embroiled in a gay relationship with Oscar Wilde; he became concerned at the potential of a gay sex scandal and immediately set out to prosecute Wilde in any way possible. He achieved his mission, launching a lengthy court case which argued the iconic playwright was a sodomy-obsessed old man that lured gay prostitutes into a lifestyle of degeneracy. It was throughout this court case that the

original letter surfaced – Douglas had used ‘Snob Queers’ as a descriptor for gay men, establishing queer reputation as a gay slur.

American newspapers used ‘queer’ as a derogatory term almost immediately, using it to highlight the fact that homosexuality was strange and abnormal. Interestingly, it was most frequently used to specifically attack effeminate gay men. Back in Britain, however, the Oxford Dictionary differentiated between using it as an adjective and a verb – even now, it seems pointless to highlight that calling someone ‘a queer’ sounds more offensive than using it as an adjective. Its original definitions remained ingrained within language, but the word’s reputation took a downhill slide and slowly but surely became intrinsically linked with hate speech and homophobia.

People always ask me, even today how hard it was working as a tradeswoman? Well, it was not easy, but it did make me tough also angry at everyone. Keep this chapter in mind while I continue thru my life pursuing becoming a carpenter.

Chapter 3 - The Making of a Tradeswomen

My story of work really starts right after high school. I moved to Newtown in Chicago right off Broadway near Belmont to a studio apartment after moving out of my mother’s home.

It was 1967 when I started working for Sears Roebuck & Co. located on Homan Ave. in Chicago, Illinois, the week after my high school graduation. I was hired as clerk in the cataloging department. I organized old sales articles in old dusty binders. I was awarded scholarship for music and one for physical education to the University of Illinois Circle Campus, but I did not want to go back to school. I was tired of school.

I quickly became bored with the cataloging work. I would watch the women at the keypunch machines directly across from my worktable most of the day. I became good friends with one of the keypunch operators, her name was Donna. She told me I could learn how to keypunch in about three months if I attended the school she had gone to. So, I took a class at night to learn keypunch verification and passed with excellent grades. Sears promoted me to keypunch operator a week after I completed the class. I worked as a keypunch operator for six months. I was still bored, and I needed to do something that I enjoyed if I would have to work the rest of my life.

I started to read different how-to-trade books on carpentry and started building & fixing things for myself. This is truly what I wanted to do! And there was no one here to help me so I decided to try and do it on my own. Every time I saw a construction site I would stop and watch the workers. One day while standing outside a store on Oak Street in Chicago I was watching the workers on a tall building across the street, and I saw one of the workers fall ten stories to his death. This however did not stop me from pursuing carpentry.

I was at an underage hangout called Mollies for homosexual men & women on North Broadway, in Chicago. There I met Liz and Mary. They owned Phillips 66 gas station on Ohio & Wells. I immediately introduce myself to them and asked, "Do you need any help?" I told them I knew how to change tires, pump gas, complete oil changes and tune-up's and that I was strong! They asked how I knew how to do all those things. I told them my father was a long-distance truck driver and he taught me everything. My father made me clean and fix everything on his truck with him as I got a little older. I traveled with him very often across the country during summer vacations.

The first night before starting work I was walking home down Broadway holding a women's hand I had just met when the police stopped us. They asked what we were doing. I told them walking home. We were immediately placed in the police car and brought to the downtown Chicago police station. Found out we were arrested for Lewd & Lascivious Behavior and Disturbing the Peace. We were told we could pay the ticket now or go to Cook County Jail for five days. We did not have the money, so they sent us to Cook County Jail for five days.

The experience was not a good one, but when we told the guards what we were arrested for they took care of us and made sure we were isolated from the other inmates. I was allowed to make one call a day. The first one was to my mother. She told me know that I am living on my own I would have to learn to take care of myself. I did not understand her reply at the time, I was confused and hurt with her answer. But did come to understand later in life.

On the second day, I called Liz and Mary from Philipps 66 and asked if they would pay the bail to get us out. Liz paid \$25.00 for each of us, and we were able to get out on the third day of our incarceration. I paid them back after I started working for them. That was my first experience with police and their hatred for homosexuals. There were several confrontations with the police after that time that would continue into the 1970's.

I started employment with Phillips 66 the next day after getting out of jail, and they paid me two dollars and fifty cents per hour. That was two dollars less than I was making at Sears. But I was jumping for joy at the chance to do something I knew I would love and being able to work outside and with my hands. I worked there for about a year.

I purchased fake identification from a guy I met in Old Town one day, so I was now able to get into the gay bars even though I was only nineteen years old. The only bar I knew that was for gay women was a hole-in-the-wall on West Lawrence Avenue in Chicago, we had to jump over a hole in the floor to get across and inside. I went there every night. One night, I met a woman named Sonny. She was a little over six feet tall and looked like a man. We played pool together and became good friends. Sonny worked at a Standard Oil gas station on Marine Drive and Lawrence Avenue, and she asked if I would like to work there. I went to the gas station the next day and asked if they needed help? They hired me!

I started working for Standard Oil Service Gas station, owner Ron Berg & his father and I learned many new things about fixing different model cars. Ron was a short Italian man and cute. And he knew it! Ron told me the wages would be four dollars an hour plus benefits. The station was open twenty-four hours a day. I told him I could start work second or third shift immediately until my boss at Phillips 66 got someone to replace me. I started working the third shift nights immediately. I worked both gas stations until Phillips 66 found someone to replace me.

While working there Sonny taught me how to drive a tow truck. And I learned a lot from Michael who was the mechanic there. I became manager in a year. I was almost 20 years old by then. Working nights was perfect for me because this way I could teach myself carpentry during the day.

I lived in my car for about four months to save money for my own apartment.

I had moved from my studio to a one-bedroom apartment on Wellington Street in Chicago once I saved enough money. I was making more money now, but I had just broken up with a woman I was living with. While there I started to remodel some of the apartment. The apartment building also had a large basement, so I was able to do some work there when I needed to cut anything. I also made furniture for the apartment. In addition to refurbishing all the kitchen cabinets in the kitchen and painting the entire apartment. The owner of the building saw what I had done and reduced my rent. He also gave me a reference to the owner of Walsh Realty and I started working for him part-time to maintain the buildings he owned. This was when I was when I was not working on other jobs This job allowed me to teach myself more carpentry skills.

Richard was the manager's name for Walsh Realty, and he gave me several buildings to work on.

During that time information was given to me by a union carpenter I met while working on a Richard's Building. He said I should ask a union local for admittance to the Carpenters Apprentice Program. He worked out of Chicago Carpenters Local 58. I was now 20 years old and with a little experience under my belt I thought I would approach Carpenters Local 58 on North Lincoln Ave. to see what I needed to do to be admitted to the Carpenters Apprentice Program.

I went to the Local and was approached by a man behind a glass partition who laughed at me when I told him I would like to be carpenter and enroll in the Carpenters Apprentice Program. He started laughing hilariously almost falling off his stool and told me there were no women in the Carpenters and that I should ask my boyfriend to teach me. I found out later that man was Wesley Isaac, President of Carpenters Local 58.

Later I would meet his son Jeffrey Isaac who became President of Carpenters Local 58, Chicago, Illinois 60659 and became Director of the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters Apprentice Program in Elk Grove Village. Jeff had many positions in the

Carpenters' Union in later years. He was an up-and-coming star in the Chicago Carpenters Union.

Most upward positions in the Carpenters Union were given to sons and family friends. It would be impossible for any women to get a position in administration if not related. But I would be happy to just be a carpenter.

So, after being refused into the apprenticeship by Local 58 I was approached by my then boss at Standard Oil Ron Berg and he asked if I wanted to open a bar with him, we would be partners. I jumped at the opportunity, and we rented a spot across the street from Carpenters Local 58 on Lincoln Avenue in Chicago and called it Chez Ron. It was to be a Lesbian Bar that I would manage and work at night. Ron was to be a silent partner. I did not much like titles like Lesbian, but this is what gay women back then were calling themselves. I however did not think of myself as a Lesbian. This was a word made up by men. I always knew who I was homosexual. A word defined as a sexual attraction or behavior between members of the same sex. Later the word gay came to being and I accepted that.

Ron introduced me to a friend that taught me about the bar and the liquor business, and I learned many things from him. I would not be 21 until two more months. So, after renting the space I started to remodel the outside and inside before the grand opening of the bar. I made sure the carpenters at Local 58 saw me working and would give them a high five of my middle finger every time I saw them watching me. I really enjoyed everything I was doing. The bar was a success for two years and then we sold it to one of Ron's friends. I continued to manage the bar for another year after selling it. I worked at the bar at night and continued to teach myself carpentry during the day.

There were many long hours, but again I loved my work which is the key to success for anyone who is looking for an occupation. People are too busy looking for how much money they can make, but I have always told everyone I knew, if you love what you do, the money will come later.

I decided to put an ad in the newspaper for FREE Labor owner pays for materials only and who to call. I received many calls this was about 1973. I was on my way to learning many new carpentry skills. I also made a mess of a couple of jobs that cost me money. But overall, the people I worked for labor free were genuinely nice to me and would give me some money any way for the work I completed.

I made many mistakes along the way, but I still enjoyed the work even though I was doing it for free. I remember one of the job's was for an artist in her loft building a partition wall. I had never done drywall before and thought I would cut the drywall with a skill saw. It was a big mistake! I should have read one of my how to books before doing it. There was drywall dust all over the artist's studio. It took me a week to clean up. I laugh at this every time I think about it!

Along the way I learned how to stripe paint off wood to refinish it. I used old dental tools to get into the grooves of wood to remove the paint. I became particularly good at it. I was getting a lot of jobs doing this. This gave me an idea. I was thinking I could start my own company soon.

During this time, I needed more money, so I went to different shops that did carpentry. I did not look at the want ads or call because they would usually say no when they found out I was a woman. I found out that walking into a shop was better. So, one shop I walked into off Ashland Ave. was a cabinet making and refinishing shop. Asked them if they needed help? The owner said yes, and how did you find out about us? I told him I was just walking and saw your shop. He was impressed! I started the next day. His daughter worked there also, and she taught me how to strip and refinish a grand piano among other things. At lunch I would watch the carpenter next door make cabinets. I worked there for about eight months. It was a fun job and gave me more skills in the trade that I needed.

I was now living in a basement apartment for free that Richard manager of Walsh Realty gave me to fix up in Old Town. Most of the time I was casing away water bugs. Moved from there to an apartment right off Rush Street. Had to find other temporary work. But decided to go back to school for Architectural & Mechanical Drafting before I moved again.

By 1975 I started my own non-union Company called CJ Construction Company. I hired a few people men & women to help with my business, these were friends of mine. One was a woman I had known since I was 18, her name was Dion. I taught them what to do stripping wood and I would do the carpentry needed like make missing pieces or fix them. All my employees enjoyed their work.

I became the premier company to call when the then boom was stripping and refurbishing wood to the way it looked when the buildings were built. If the wood was damaged, we would make a new piece to match the original. This is when I met Ursula and his family two sons Guy and Carl and a daughter who already had a construction company called Stringer Construction. They approached me and asked if I would subcontract a job with them located right off North Ashland. I accepted and started work on a building that was then written up in Better Homes and Gardens. After the job was completed, Ursula asked if I would start working for him, I again accepted. I kept my construction company CJ Construction going however because I started to get a lot more jobs. I let the people working for me continue to complete the jobs for CJ Construction and I worked for Stringer Construction on the side. This is when the Union Business Agents started to come by my jobs and asked questions again.

Now I started reading everything I could about Union Construction and what they were all about. Almost everything I have done in my life has been self-taught, this was no different.

Come to find out when a non-union company becomes prominent Business Agents (B.A.) and organizers for the union try to sign non-union companies up as a Union Company. I was not having anything to do with them. They became very persistent! Even asked me to join as a Union Apprentice Carpenter about 1976. I told them they did not want me in 1970, why now, was it for affirmative action that just passed? I then told them no again, I did not need them anymore! They would however constantly harass me over the next several years.

While working for Stringer Construction as a sub-contractor and carpenter I found out that Ursula was a union carpenter out of Local 58 before his accident, where his right arm was disabled. That is when he started his own company with his family.

I continued working for Stringer Construction as just a carpenter for his business and owning my own business until 1979. One day Ursula came to me and said he had just been accepted for a multi-million-dollar job, but he would have to sign as a Union Contractor to complete it. He told me that means I would have to become a union carpenter to continue and work for him. I was upset, and he new my story, I really loved this man and his family for teaching me everything he knew as a carpenter. He told me to get the chip off my shoulder about the union. You do not have to like the union, but the union will do only one thing for you if you work the hours. The union will give you great health benefits and a great pension when you retire. He said he could get me a union card as a journeymen carpenter, and I did not have to go thru the apprenticeship because I already have the experience.

Okay, I thought about it, I got the cheap off my shoulder and decided I would join the Carpenters' Union so I could continue working with Ursula and his family. I joined the Carpenters' Union in 1979 and would be with Carpenters' Local 58. It was the same local Ursula was in and the same Local that refused me entry into the Carpenters' Apprenticeship in 1970.

A newspaper in Chicago found out I was joining the Carpenters Union and a reporter Barbara Brotman came to a jobsite I was on at the time. The article headline "Construction trade unions now opening doors to women", was place in the Chicago Tribune with a picture of me working. Article came out October 14, 1979.