Plumber

ANGELA SUMMER

An advocate of solar energy, alternative lifestyles, and the term “journeywoman,” she has more than sex separating her from construction industry co-workers.

My father was a tankerman. To be more explicit, he unloaded and loaded barges on, like, oil and gas. And he was like a dead man a lot. It was really just labor. There wasn’t much skill to the job at all. He didn’t make much money. My mother was a housewife, a frustrated housewife. Ours was a big Catholic family and my parents put expectations on some of their kids, but they didn’t seem to have any designs on me. But everything I’ve done—and I’ve tried a lot of different jobs—they’ve supported me in doing it.

I guess the only traditional work I’ve done is a month and a half of waitressing. I’ve done apple picking and some taxi driving when I was eighteen. Let’s see, other things, I guess it’s all been pretty non-traditional, like housepainting. No, let’s see, when I was nineteen—I think I was nineteen—I worked in a can factory in Baltimore and that was very traditional work. I mean it was all women who worked at the machines. They paid a dollar ninety an hour. I remember that very clearly. It was piecework, so you could make more money if you worked faster. One time in an eight-hour day I did thirteen hours’ worth of work. It was the hardest work I have ever done in my life. I can still say I haven’t done anything harder. It was all women working on the machines, and there were some men doing maintenance, but women did all the assembly line work.
What I really disliked about the job was it was real shit pay, and I stood on my feet all day long in one spot. You know, now I stand on my feet all day too, but I get to move around. But on that job I’d stand in one spot all day long, or I’d move a few feet, but that was it. And my feet would kill me. I thought it was terrible how much money we were making, especially like the other women; a lot of them were raising their families. They had like six or seven kids. Some of them were married, but their husbands didn’t work. They hung out in the pubs. It was a very sad scene. I disliked that a lot, but I really liked the women I worked with. They were really neat. They were all over forty and all the young girls that’d come and try to work there, they’d all just quit, because you couldn’t keep up with them. And they wanted me to stay, so they would just say, “Don’t worry about it,” when my table would pile up to the point where if there was just one more box of cans the whole thing would fall over. Then everybody would stop and go to my table, and in about two seconds it would just be done. They would just do it. And it was a really hard thing to accept, you know, because I always thought I was a good, hard, fast worker. Like I had done picking, and my dad worked us pretty hard, and I thought I was pretty fast, but I couldn’t keep up with those women. It blew me away and it was real hard to, like, not quit. And to feel like even though it was just a few pennies, maybe, I was slowing them down when they were making such shit wages anyway. When, after about a month, I could keep up with them, it was just wonderfully satisfying.

They were typical housewives—no causes like feminism and stuff. I would talk about things with them, and they thought I was just a little out of it, but they liked me. I had hitchhiked all around the United States and they had never been off their block in Baltimore hardly. I learned a lot from them.

After I came back to Seattle, at one point I decided I was gonna get a good skill and make some money. That meant something
which had usually been thought of as a man’s job. At first I thought about carpentry. I think that’s what most women think of. It’s more of a romantic feeling to work with wood and make beautiful things. The only reason I didn’t do it was I was scared by the math. So I took up plumbing, which has more math and more complicated math than carpentry. But I thought there would be no math when I took it up.

I knew a woman who had gone to welding school at SOIC [Seattle Opportunities Industrialization Center]. It sounded great to me. I was gonna get paid to go to school, and it was pretty good money, too. She made a hundred eighty-six dollars a week while training and that was six years ago. When I heard that, my eyes got big and I ran down there. And that’s pretty much how I got into plumbing. The attraction was being able to use my body and be physical, which I love to do, plus being able to use my mind. And feeling like it would be a way to use my mind that was more practical than schools, where they want you to write essays; that felt like a lot of busywork. That and the money were the attractions.

I didn’t have much fear except about the math. If I had known at the time what lay ahead, I would have had more fear. But I didn’t realize how creepy it might be out there, so I went into it pretty blindly, thinking that it would work out like everything always does. Going with the flow used to be more my way of doing things. I probably had some fears about being qualified, about being able to do things as well as a guy, since you’ve been told all your life that guys are better at fixing things. I work on that a lot, and it’s definitely not as bad as it used to be, but it’s there a little still.

At first I was the only woman in the class. There were other women in the school, because there were also very traditional jobs for women taught there, like secretarial and such. The last couple months there was another woman in the plumbing class with me. Two-thirds of the class were black men. Some of them
had gone to high school with me at Garfield, so I was pretty comfortable. We had pretty different lifestyles. I lived in collective housing and was into the alternative scene. I don’t know exactly what they were doing. They’d have their cars and girl friends and stuff, but we got along pretty well. Some of them I’ve seen on jobs and they’ve made it, and some of them I knew wouldn’t make it. That was kind of sad and depressing. They were doped up too much and couldn’t get the discipline to come to school all the time.

I was at SOIC for about six, seven months. I learned the vocabulary, the names of tools and how to use them. I learned basic stuff like how to do diagrams, but not much hands-on stuff. It helped me when I got into the union. I already had a foothold. There were a lot of guys starting out in the union that didn’t know anything. And I knew a lot more than them. So the school was good in that way.

It was bad in that it’s only a few months, and then you have to go out and sell yourself. You know some stuff and if you’re lucky maybe you have worked on a little job, but you don’t have a lot of knowledge.

I felt comfortable with some of the tools like crescent wrenches, screwdrivers, pipe wrenches, and basin wrenches. I used a threading machine and a cutting machine, which were really nice to learn before I went into the union. I also learned how to solder pipes together, which was the only practical hands-on thing I learned. I didn’t learn how to fix a toilet or anything like that.

The school really pushed us to get jobs. When Washington Natural Gas was on strike and they were hiring scabs, I got a lot of pressure from the school to go down and apply. I decided to apply to get the experience and see what was going on, but I knew I would never take the job. So I went down and applied and they liked me, which I knew they would. I was supposed to call
them back, which, of course, I didn't do. I was called into the school office and given a lot of shit by my instructor and counselor and told I should take the job. I told them there was no way I was gonna work for a scab shop or cross a picket line. They said everyone needs to make money and I shouldn't feel that way. It was ridiculous. I needed a job and should go down and get a job. I thought that was real bad. I didn't expect them to be that way.

After leaving SOIC it took three years for me to get into the union. I filed suit, applied twice, and I was finally accepted. My first job was as a helper. When I first applied, I was told the books were closed and they weren't accepting anyone except blacks. I filed a discrimination suit. Maybe I should explain how it happened that they were just taking blacks. Six years before, UCWA [United Construction Workers Association], a group of black construction workers, had taken them to court to get into the union. At that time there were no women or people of another color who had applied and been rejected, at least that they knew about. So the judge said, "Okay, you'll have to take blacks," but that was all. They weren't told they had to take anybody else, so I got a thing in the mail saying, well, we're taking blacks, so if you qualify, come on down. That's when I filed suit. I didn't hear anything about it and finally got something from the EEOC when I'd been in the union for about a year. Then they opened their books, I applied, and was told I was number fifty-something on the list and they only took twenty. So I just went on with my business doing other things, applied again, and finally got in.

I was hired as a helper during the summer, and right before school started I became a first-year apprentice. From being a helper I pretty much knew what to expect. I was very fortunate on my first job. We were converting an elementary school into a school for retarded or handicapped kids. My journeyman and foreman was the first black man to get into the union. He was a
wonderful, nice guy. Since I already knew how to do a lot of things, I was on my own quite a bit. We worked together basically like a team.

We were changing around toilets and things so we were using sledgehammers and mauls. Busting up stuff is a heavy kind of work. I also used drills and saber saws and heated up lead until it was cherry red and poured it for showers and different joints. And rotomilling—that’s a drill made for going through concrete. It acts like a jackhammer going back and forth, pushing its way into the concrete. Rotohammering isn’t that hard, but it’s a drag when you’re drilling into the ceiling all day long. It’s hard on your arms, and a couple times I wasn’t given eye protection, so you get little pieces of concrete in your eyes. Now I’m real good about making sure I have eye goggles.

There’s no such thing as a typical job. I’ve been on jobs where I work with just one other guy and a lot of times with a small crew of four or five. Then I’ve worked on big jobs with fifteen or twenty guys, so it just depends. I’ve never worked on a crew with another woman. I have been on jobs where there have been other women in different trades and only twice did we have the same lunchtime even. Some of the men I’ve worked with have been really decent, and some haven’t been decent at all. Usually if I’m working with one guy, even if he doesn’t like me, we both do our best to get along and do the job well. But if there’s another guy for the man to talk with, I might as well be dead. They’re real friendly if I’m the only person they have to talk to, but with another man around, first they talk sports and then they start talking about women and stuff. They’re real two-faced a lot of times. I haven’t developed any friendships where I see anybody off the job.

I haven’t been discriminated against in the work too much—just in a social way. I don’t know how to explain it, but you’re very aware the whole time you’re hanging out with these guys that you are different from them. I feel excluded a lot of the
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time. If I’m in a situation where I can go off and do something else, I don’t mind it. A lot of times I like that. During break or lunch is the only time I can be by myself. Sometimes if I am stuck in a place where I can’t go away for lunch it can be creepy—but I’m almost used to it. I bring a book and I read. I don’t know . . . .

My supervisors—some have been real jerks and some have been real nice. My last foreman was very surprised to see me, but open and thoughtful, a very nice man. Another time I worked for a year with a man who was wonderful. He was in his late fifties and a pleasure to work for. He was very honest, got upset with me a couple times and let me know it, but wasn’t a jerk about it. I think it’s easy, for a white man especially, to put a white woman like in the role of their kid. Even if they don’t think it’s good for you to be doing the work, they have a family feeling for you. A lot of their kids are doing things they didn’t plan or want ‘em doing. They kind of take you under their wing. They’re always shocked and find it hard to believe that I’m over twenty years old. It kind of destroys this little girl image.

But they’re not all that way. There was this one Mormon man I worked for that was a real jerk. We were a small crew of only four or five guys and all got along pretty well before he came on the job. As the only apprentice, I did a lot of “gofer” work but also got to do things on my own, too. That relationship was destroyed when this new supervisor arrived. Every joke he told was either racist or sexist. I don’t remember a lot of them, but one that stuck in my mind was, “My wife didn’t mind that I was bringing home scalps, but not ones with holes in them.” Something on that order—pretty gross. It really infuriated me ’cause I could feel, I understood how he could get off on that—the idea of scalping a woman—a woman’s cunt, as he called it.

Another time on that job we were working sixteen hours a day and under a lot of pressure to get things done quickly. One night when we were working on the fifteenth floor, I was under a sink
undoing a nut with a basin wrench. It was an awkward position, a drag, and I was just starting to get it done when he came over and said to me, "Run down to the basement and get me a couple copper fittings."

I said, "Okay, in a minute. I'm almost done." It was gonna take me a half a second to finish that job.

He said, "Get off your cunt and go get that." I was shocked. It just didn't make sense. Like it made a lot of sense for me to finish what I was doing before I got out from under the sink and ran down to the basement and took twenty minutes. I would have to crawl back under there and get into this position again. I wanted to cry and scream.

Finally, I started screaming, "You fucking asshole!" But I didn't feel any better. He just smirked like he'd gotten what he wanted. It's so fun to get women fired up. What really hurt me was there was this guy standing around that I had been working with and felt really good about, and he didn't say a damn thing. It made me feel rotten. I felt like we were friends and had good rapport. None of the other men would have said something like that to me, but with him they felt like they had to stick up for another guy. Behind his back they would tell me he was a creep, but there was this peer pressure with him around.

The union hasn't been much better. They didn't want me in and the big-wigs haven't given me support since I got in. One time I ripped some porno off a wall, a poster-size crotch shot of a woman, and the apprenticeship coordinator said I should have called him in, but that I had to understand I was in a man's trade, and that the men shouldn't have to live by my rules. So I showed him the crotch shot and asked him if he found it objectionable. He said, well, he guessed so. Some other pornographic things have disappeared, and I've been told I could be in trouble and sued by the union for taking personal property, although nobody has seen me take personal property.

The last thing that happened was that there's a Rigid Tool
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calendar—you might be familiar with them. They don’t show naked women. They show women in sleazy bathing suits looking like they’re almost fucking tools, and these calendars appeared in our apprentice classrooms last year. So for three nights a week, three hours a night, you’re supposed to look at the front of the class at the blackboard with that calendar on it. That’s all there is to look at. I talked to the teacher and he took it down, and then it was back up, and he took it down again while I was there, and turned it around for my class. Another woman apprentice, who’s not in my class, asked the apprenticeship coordinator to remove it. He wouldn’t, said it was a tradition and Rigid Tool calendars have been around for twenty-five years. And she replied that so has woman beating and child abuse been around for twenty-five years, and you could consider them to be a tradition, but that doesn’t make ‘em right. Then he started screaming at her and said it stayed. At that point, I went to him and said I wanted it removed also. He said no, it stayed.

I found out through this calendar thing that if I went to EEOC the only thing they could do is file a suit. They can’t call up and say, “You should stop doing this thing.” I called the Washington State Human Rights Commission and I got a guy that actually called the coordinator up three different times. Then he said that he’d done more than he should have, and all he could do is file a suit, and if I wanted to file a suit he’d love to take my case. But if I file a suit, I’ll be completely ostracized, so for now, all I can do is scream and rant and rave and kick things. And I talk with my friends.

You know, your friends change when you change. Most of my friends are women in non-traditional work. I hang out a lot with women that are in my union. I need the support of women who do what I do. Like I lived for a while with a woman medical student, and it just didn’t work out because what we were doing with our lives was so different. We couldn’t support each other or understand what we were going through.
My body's changed a lot from the work, too. I feel really strong. When I'm not working, I feel out of shape and look forward to going back to work. I don't push myself too hard physically. You can build yourself up, and if you go slower, it'll just take a little longer to get there. In the last year the union has taught us about taking care of our bodies and there's more consciousness about not doing more than you should. I did once put my back out picking up four-inch cast-iron pipe, but usually I'll ask for help. With older guys it's pretty easy to get help, but younger guys are still into the macho thing.

I've also done some obvious things to my body, like smashing my fingers so they'll never be the same. I had done some core drilling and was carrying the core drill, that probably weighs eighty pounds or more, back to a shaft. It was a messy job site with a lot of stuff laying around, and I tripped over some rebar that was sticking out. Rebar's a half-inch-round metal bar used to reinforce concrete. So I tripped over it, and I think I could have regained my feet, but I forgot about the weight of the core drill on my shoulder. When I realized I couldn't stand up, I threw the drill away from my body, but there was no way I could pull my hand back out. It bounced off my fingers and smashed them. I mean they were split open. The foreman came running out and ran around in circles until I got in the van, honked the horn, and said, "Get over here and drive me to the hospital." It took us about three minutes to get to Harborview, and I spent five days in the hospital having pins put in my fingers.

I was out of work for ten months. The bones didn't grow together right on my ring finger, so they decided to do a bone graft. I went into the hospital again for four days, and they opened up my elbow and took bone out of it and added the bone to the finger. I did physical therapy for my little pinkie, too, and everything was supposed to be fine, but it's pretty stiff. It won't curve beyond a forty-five-degree angle. Actually, not to mini-
mize it, but if you're gonna hurt some fingers, those are the best
two to hurt. It hasn't really been a problem—just a drag when
it's wet and cold. They get stiff.

I'm a fourth-year apprentice, almost a journeyman now, and
I'm kind of scared by that. I've gotten into this mold of the
subordinate. I mean, I'm so used to having someone tell me
what to do that I worry about having to just go out there and do it
on my own. Lately though, I've been getting more feedback as
far as people telling me that I'd done a good job. It's not some-
thing that men do. It's hard. People don't always give you
strokes or good feedback. But I usually get the feeling, even if
they don't tell me, that they're pretty happy with my work,
because sometimes you get into a rhythm, really producing, and
you're partners. I hope that feeling carries over to when I'm a
journeywoman.

I think plumbing is a good field for women. Oftentimes car-
pentry is harder physically. Plumbing sounds like dirty work.
You think you're going to be working with shit or toilets all the
time, so women don't think about doing it much, but it's a good
job with lots of security.