

Jill of all Trades

Betty Lau, founder of All Women Contractors, proves that girls can build, repair and wreck with the best of them.

BY LAURA AIKEN



I bet Betty Lau pulls off her hard hat and work boots with the same put-together panache as the feminine outfit she met me in. Her favourite part of her job is demolition, but there isn't dirt under her nails or any other indicators that this is the same lady who climbed roofs when she was nine-months pregnant. I'm sure her tools are clean and meticulously organized. She is anything but the butch stereotype of women working in the ultra male-dominated world of trades. Yet for Lau, fixing, building and tearing things apart was the only career that filled the whole bill.

Lau grew up with three siblings, including a particularly handy brother who inspired her. With mom working multiple jobs and money tight, Lau blossomed as a child entrepreneur. As a seven-year-old, she cared for the neighbourhood dogs and remembers the excitement of being rewarded with "candy" money. Later on, she worked in a nursing home and as a Blue Jays ticket taker. She put her time in at Fortune 500 companies, but always continued side jobs and even graduated as a graphic artist from George Brown. She was hired to paint wall murals in homes; further renovation work blossomed as clients discovered the breadth of her skills. This adventurous yearn for versatility in a career combined with her entrepreneur's soul of, led her to break into full-time trades.

"It's always something different," she says. "I found when I was working in the corporate world, everything was the same, day in and day out...I just couldn't do it anymore. I got to thinking there's got to be more to it than this, with somebody controlling my income and somebody telling me what I can eat or drink or what I can wear. That's when I woke up and thought, 'you know what? You have to work for yourself.'" *Continued on page 30*

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Happiness is not a
matter of events;
it depends upon the
tides of the mind.

— ALICE MEYNELL

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Lau launched A&N Contractors while still at her corporate job, with her brother and his friends as workers. However, it didn't work out as well as she'd hoped. The business needed full-time focus.

"I decided to go full force with my company and changed the name to All Women Contractors. Now I'm doing full time renovations and basements, not just repairs anymore—it's full-fledged. I hire subcontractors. There are some men because it's a male-dominated industry and can't be helped. I've been looking for many years and still need more women."

Lau marketed her all-women concept towards the gay community, women with their own homes, seniors or anyone who may not feel comfortable alone with a man in his or her house. She started the business in Toronto, branching out when she moved to Pickering, Ont. Working mainly on referrals for six years has served the business well, and Lau says she just put up a website and began advertising last year. Marketing the business concept has always been an area open for humour.

"Early in business, some guys working for me took my flyers and business cards and dressed up in grass skirts and coconuts, tool belts and work boots. I didn't know what kind of image that was going to give, but they went through all these stores and people were laughing. I got calls from it. I was like, 'you got to be kidding me. That worked?'"

If you're considering entering the well-paying field of trades (and the opportunities are there), Lau says it's important to enjoy dealing with people, love physical work and be self-motivated.

"You do have to have that core body strength to pull your own weight, no different than a man—except we don't have plumber's bum!

Every job has its own little downfalls and upsides. I wouldn't trade it for the world though."

Working in such a pervasively male-dominated industry has its trials, of course. Lau says sometimes men do a double take in disbelief when they see a woman on the job site. Others are worried about or don't feel right about women tackling heavy lifting. Sometimes Lau says she feels she really has to prove she knows what she's talking about. It's important to know what your boundaries are with the people you work with, subcontracted out or not.

"I'm very picky in working with certain males and having women dress a certain way. We're in an industry of proving we can do the work ... It's not a dating service."

While Lau is serious about being taken seriously, she loves to have fun on the job sites. There's no shortage of laughter when ripping things apart or patching them up; a light-hearted atmosphere is key to staying interested and passionate about the work. She found deeper inspiration through her role as a house leader overseeing women's builds for Habitat for Humanity. The women she trained were at ground zero in their knowledge of construction, and she loved seeing how much fun they had in their success and the confidence gained from their new skills. Lau is a great figure-head for girl power, and it's without surprise that she has three little bundles of estrogen at home, ages 10, eight and six.

"They are quite handy ... They have their own tool belts, their own hammers and they know how to use them. They know how to cook, too, but that's thanks to my mother," she says with a giggle.

Lau's daughters may very well work alongside her one day. And if you think a career in the trades could be right for you, you just may, too.