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# Women, Literacy & Construction

## *Banana Kelly Housing Related Enhanced Work Experience Program*



**F**or the average young woman in the South Bronx, life is difficult and often overwhelming. Good education is scarce, drug use and crime are rampant, housing inadequate and job opportunities few. The obstacles to a productive and satisfying personal and work life are great: for many, such a life is almost impossible.

Banana Kelly's Housing Related Enhanced Work Experience Program, a Cityworks funded project, provides an alternative. It offers young women and men, ages 18 to 24 years old, an opportunity to get the education and training they want and need to

advance academically, to defeat the odds of living in a chaotic environment, and to gain productive employment in the construction industry. In this intensive classroom and on-the-job-training program, these young people are involved in renovating a five-story abandoned building (to provide housing for low-income and homeless people) while they learn — about reading, writing and math skills, about developing positive work habits, about working cooperatively with others, about their communities, about themselves.

The thirty participants in Banana Kelly's HREWE program

BY ANNE MEISENZ AHL

have much in common. They are all high school drop-outs, they are all deeply familiar with the problems and temptations of urban life. They are all highly motivated to learn, to grow, to challenge themselves. The young women in the program represent a special set of circumstances, however: in addition to fighting against the temptation to fail, they must also fight against society's belief that women are not fit to do construction work. They must be tough enough to take on the challenge daily, defying the taunts of bosses and co-workers, who continually claim that they cannot work "as well as a man" (and who are continually surprised). The following is an interview with Norma Samuel one of Banana Kelly's women participants, who discusses her feelings about being a woman in the construction field. [My questions are italicized].

*Can you start by talking personally and just tell why you chose to go into a construction training program and eventually do construction work? Why construction?*

Why construction? Well, I have a younger brother, Nelson, who was in the program and he knows the kind of work I like to do. He knows I'm hard working, and all the work I used to do in the past, like welding. He dared me to go into construction and so at first I went into it like a dare but then I ended up liking it. I didn't think it was going to be like this. I thought it was going to be hard. It was hard in the beginning and all, but then I got into it and I loved it.

*What was hard about it?*

Well, at first, it was hard being a female. Being a female, because, the guys used to tell me, why don't you go home and take care of your babies. They said it's not a woman's job. The more they used to tell me the harder I would try and try. It was hard for me being a female because I was afraid of it being just men and another female, it was just me and Samona, with all guys. It was hard, and it was scary, very scary...

*What was scary about it?*

Well, climbing on the beams, for one

thing. There were no floors or anything, just beams, and you had to climb out on the fire escape. And then for someone like me who used to be scared of heights it was hard to look out. I used to call on the guys to help me out a little. They didn't want to at times, but they did help me out. They did. It was very scary.

*What do you think gave you the confidence to stay with it?*

Well, mostly it was because the guys kept telling me to get out, get out, so I HAD to stay with it. Then I couldn't leave. And I have a son. I like for him to look up to me, and when he gets older to read about me, and about women in construction. He's a very smart kid, so I know I have to be good for him. He's two years old now.

*What was easy about the construction training program?*

The classes were easy for me, but in the building I didn't find anything easy at first. Like learning how to use the saw, and the hammer, and all kinds of measuring was kind of hard. But even they ended up being easy once I made up my mind to put my head to it. And then I succeeded at that, too.

*But the classes were easy for you?*

Regular classes, writing and reading books, that was nothing for me. I'm a person that in the past didn't read anything, but now I read book after book. I finish a book in two days.

*What was high school like for you?*

I was a very shy person, and for me, when I was in high school it was hard. I used to get embarrassed about any little thing, and I was afraid to talk to people. I was afraid. I was scared people would talk about me. I don't know why, but, you know, when you're shy, you're just scared, you keep to yourself. And then I just stopped trying to get along with people and I started hanging out and cutting out of school and everything. It was hard. It was fun when I was outside, at the time, but when I look back, it hurt a lot. And that's why I came here.

*So why did you come here?*

I came here to get my diploma, to get my GED. It was hard for me because I had my baby, he was three or four months. And I had problems, family problems. And when I had the baby, that's when I did a lot of thinking. And I realized everybody's not going to be there to help me. I know like, if they weren't there before, what's going to make them be there now? So I said I've just got to do it on my own, for myself and my son.

*Do you think it's harder for women to go back to school after they drop out if they have kids?*

It depends on the woman and how she is if she really wants to do her thing. For me, it wasn't hard for me. And I was thinking a lot so I decided I'm going back to school. Partly because for me, I had my mother there to help take care of the kids. She's the one who used to tell me: Norma, I want you to go out there and DO it; you listen to your mother and you feel if you don't do it you'll be breaking your mom's heart. You can't just say: Nah, mommy, I just want to do this and that while you take care of my son. Never. No, it was great because she was always there to take care of my son. And to this day she still takes care of my son. And with my job now, she's real proud of me, of course.

*What kind of advice would you give other women who wanted to go into construction?*

Go for it. Just go for it. Don't be afraid or anything. Just go through the doors you have to go through, hold your heart if you have to, but just go, ask questions, and you'll get around. Don't always think it's just a man's job, because it's not. We can do the same work. At first I didn't think I could handle the hand saw, or some of the heavy tools, but I ended up doing good. At first you have to make a couple of mistakes but you have to just go after it to get it.

*Anne Meisenzahl has been the Education Director for the Banana Kelly Housing Related Enhanced Work Experience Program for the past 3 1/2 years. The program is situated in the South Bronx of New York.*



Women learners in English as a Second Language and literacy classes need their lives outside the classroom to be acknowledged and discussed. The material in this kit describes many everyday issues in women's lives and provides relevant and stimulating material so that women can improve their English skills while considering their real problems.

The Women's Kit is a series of eight booklets plus an introduction . Each booklet is made up of excerpts from materials written by women about their lives in Latin America, Africa and England.

The kit is intended to be the basis for discussion about women's experiences — as homemakers, paid workers, and mothers. Our aim is to encourage women to engage in discussion and critical thinking about their lives.

The kit is published jointly by the Participatory Research Group (PRG) and the International Council for Adult Education, Women's Program. Call or write PRG to order your kit. The price is \$25 per kit; \$40 for institutions. Individual booklets may be purchased for \$2.50 each. Please add 15% for postage and handling. **Participatory Research Group, 229 College Street, Suite 309, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4.**



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