

# Welding Offers Women New Career Opportunities

*Being employed in this exciting field can lead to many other opportunities, and in the United States, the numbers of female welders have continued to grow over the years*

BY ADRIENNE ZALKIND AND MARTHA BAKER



*Fig. 1 — For Maria Hanna, a recent graduate of the Hobart Institute, welding was a good field to pursue. To support her family, she was looking for a career that offered relatively short-term training to produce long-term earnings.*

The old adage that behind every man is a great woman is no longer true, at least not in the welding industry. Currently, the United States is in the midst of a welder shortage that is expected to intensify as baby boomers retire and the need for skilled labor grows. Studies show that there are more than 500,000 welders employed in the U.S. The need for these skilled workers is only getting stronger as virtually all construction and manufacturing companies require some form of welding, from production to maintenance and repair.

The writing is on the wall. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that the number of welders employed in the United States has declined about 15% from 640,000 in 2000 to 546,000 in 2006. According to the American Welding Society (AWS) and other industry research, the average age of a welder is in the mid-fifties, with many approaching 60 years old. It is estimated that more than half of the industry's highly trained workforce is nearing retirement, creating a potential shortage of more than 200,000 skilled welders by 2010.

## Women Take Notice of the Openings in Welding

For decades, women have played a role in the welding industry, and several employers and other industry members have been noticing more join the field. In fact, while the rate of welders in the United States has been shrinking, the number of female welders in the United States has remained steady. In 2006, about 6% of welders were female, which is about the same percentage as reported in 2005

and up slightly from 2004, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Statistics from the Hobart Institute of Welding Technology (HIWT) from 1998 through 2006 indicate that 1.9% of the students in the Structural Welding Program and in the Combination Structural and Pipe Welding Program have been female. Additionally, women have participated in HIWT technical classes including Preparation for American Welding Society Certified Welding Inspector Examination and other inspection courses.

Welding, as in most trades, has long been considered a man's job, but with a crisis of a welder shortage weighing on the industry, companies are offering better incentives to recruit skilled welders and losing their reluctance to open their doors to females. Many members of the welding industry believe that women possess the characteristics that make up a good welder, including a steady hand and meticulous eye. A woman's role as a professional in the trades is growing more vast and diverse as more women leave their desk jobs and roll up their sleeves.

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## Female Welder Success Stories

One of the women who recently completed training at the Hobart Institute is Maria Hanna of St. Paris, Ohio — Fig. 1. As a single parent, Hanna was seeking a career with relatively short-term training that would produce long-term earnings so that she could support her family. Within nine months, Hanna has the certificate to prove she can perform the work.

Welding can be a very lucrative occupation. It can open the door to many other opportunities including inspection, management roles, sales of various welding equipment, teaching, or business ownership. Hanna sees this as an advantage and a stepping stone to future positions within the industry.

This isn't the first time that women have stepped up to the plate when they

saw a need in the welding industry. With the United States' entry into World War II in 1941, millions of American women responded to the government's call to enter high-paying jobs in the war-production industry. This was a vast change for many of them who had pursued the more traditional feminine roles of housewife and mother or who had worked at "pink-collar" jobs with lower pay. Classes at the Hobart school at that time were filled with women who were training for employment in manufacturing for the military. The war brought a peak in the numbers of women in the previously male-dominated industry.

These women should be applauded for struggling to persevere in a male-dominated industry. They should also be applauded for changing the welding industry, as well as all trades, and for taking risks to better themselves while helping to keep manufacturing in America strong.

## Changing the Face of the Welding Industry

Today, while the numbers of women entering the welding industry are long from equaling their male counterparts, these professionals and role models are changing the face of the welding industry and encouraging others to continue the trend. A career in welding can be extremely lucrative and exciting, and can lead to high-level employment in various industries. In fact, for those who are involved in the welding industry, there is a strong conviction that a large part of the U.S. economy is dependent on welding, and that continued advances in the field are necessary to increase productivity and strengthen the nation's financial stability. ♦

## CAN WE TALK?

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