

Call her Ms. Fix-It

► In this tough economy, some women are hoping that classes in the building trades will open the door to a rewarding career.

By John Loftus
Times Staff Writer

There are not many women in the building trades, but their numbers are growing.

Go where people learn those trades and you can get a fair idea of how many women are studying for careers like plumbing, construction, building maintenance and electrical work.

Sarah Levetter, who worked in offices for a dozen years, wants to be an electrician. She's studying for that career at the Orleans Technical Institute.

She's one of 15 women who have been learning building trades this year, according to Justin Windheim, an Orleans spokesman.

More than 9 percent of those employed in all aspects of construction in the country are women, he said. At Orleans, women make up about 4 percent of the students in residential and commercial electricity, plumbing and heating, building maintenance, carpentry and air conditioning, refrigeration and heating.

The proportion of women in these classes is growing, Windheim said. In 2008 and 2009, a dozen women were enrolled.

This year's class has 25 percent more women. Building maintenance, which encompasses several job skills, is the most popular curriculum for women, Windheim said.

Levetter was laid off from her last job and wanted something different, but she didn't know what to expect of her Residential and Commercial Electricity class.

"I had no idea," she said last week during an interview at the Red Lion Road school. "I just jumped in and went for it."

She encountered some challenges. Electrical work, she said, is characterized by so much detail. There is so much to learn "that you have to know this is what you want," Levetter said.

Orleans encourages women to enter build-

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ing trades and helps them find jobs, said Bessie Wilson, a classroom coordinator who heads the school's Women in Trades support group.

"We tell them they can do the job as well as a male, or better," she said as Levetter demonstrated some techniques in an Orleans classroom shop.

Levetter said some men in her class "are just waiting for me to mess up."

During a classroom wiring exercise, the opposite happened.

"I took my time and watched everybody else get shocked," she explained.

Still, Wilson said, women will find some resistance when they're looking for jobs in the trades they've learned, but that's diminishing. However, when it does occur, it can be found where least expected.

"I've talked to female employers who won't hire females," she said.

Employers might believe that a woman is too small or not strong enough to handle the kind of down-and-dirty manual labor some jobs require, Wilson said.

Delena Caleb, a 2007 Orleans building maintenance grad, said co-workers are surprised that she is strong enough to move heavy air-conditioning units and will ask if she needs any help. She manages, she said.

"It's how you lift," Caleb explained.

She works in building maintenance at the Sheraton Four Points hotel on Roosevelt Boulevard. The Parkwood resident got the job just weeks after completion of her building-maintenance course.

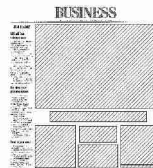
Caleb does what any other maintenance engineer does: She keeps things running and repairs them when they stop. That involves plumbing, carpentry, electrical work and knowledge of air-conditioning and heating units.

She's always busy, too. Her co-workers don't find it unusual to be working alongside a woman.

"I think they find it interesting," she said.

That's now. A few years ago, things were different.

When she was hired, she said, it seemed some other employees felt it was odd for a woman to be



in maintenance. The challenge, she said, was getting them to realize "I was hired to do a job."

Caleb got her job by answering an ad, although the hotel was one employer that Orleans staffers had suggested she contact.

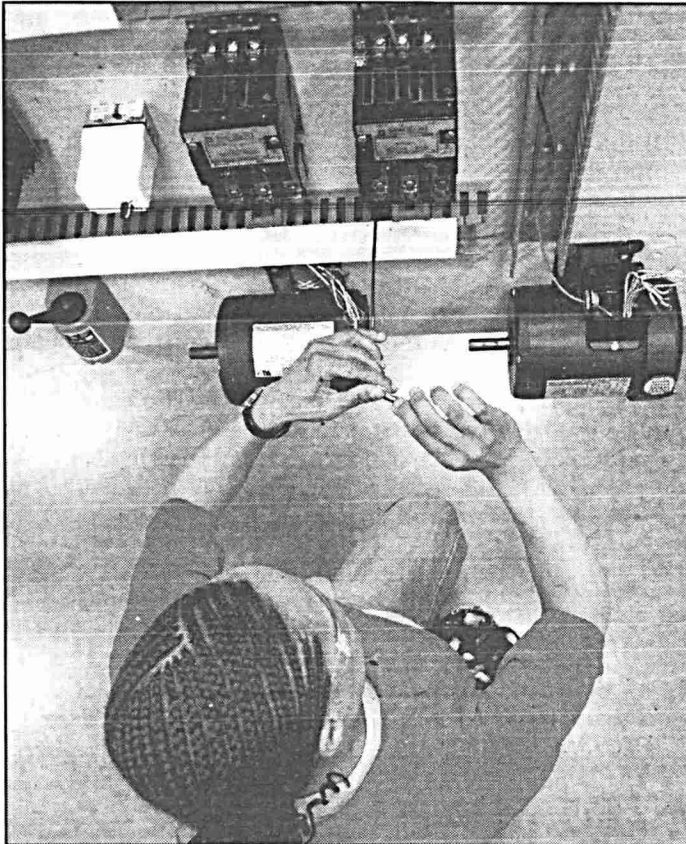
"They gave us a list," she said.

Levetter is optimistic about her new career. One electrical contractor has already asked her to give him a call.

Levetter is confident that she'd be woman enough to handle the job. ••

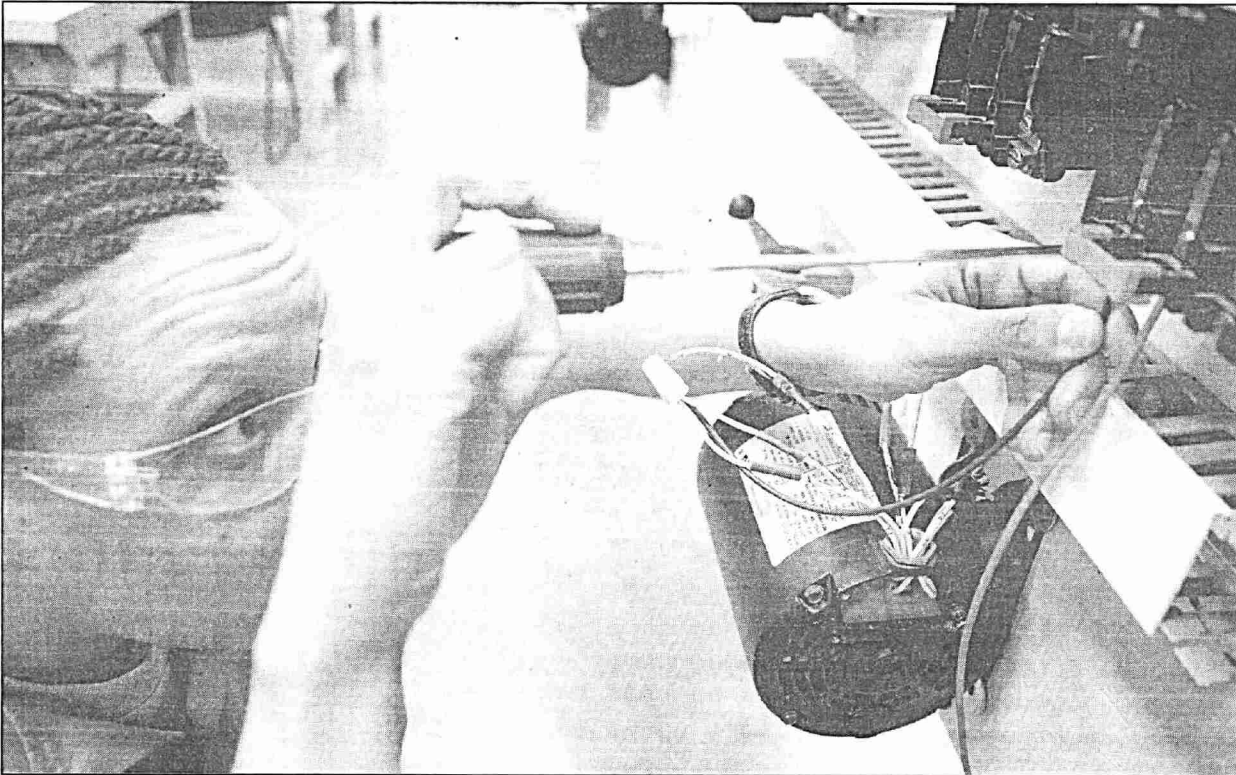
The Orleans Technical Institute hosts an open house every Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon. Call 215-728-4733 for information.

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JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTO

Sarah Levetter, who worked in offices for a dozen years, is training to be an electrician.



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Sarah Levetter practices connecting power wires from a coil to a motor during an Orleans Technical Institute class.