

# THE FIX

## A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

**Guest:** Renee Jones, Program Director – [Chicago Women in the Trades](#)

**Run Time:** 28:27

**Questions or Feedback:** [thefix@oatey.com](mailto:thefix@oatey.com)

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00:00:05 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Kathryn, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast, it's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. All right, Doug, we are back for another episode and I'm super excited about this because I think I told you earlier, I've been trying to get a hold of someone because I know they're super busy to take some time and talk with us because I've been watching from afar all the great work that they're doing in the Windy City.

00:01:02 **Doug Buchan**

Yes, yes. All right. So I'm going to take you on a little timeline here, Katherine, you tell me what all these things have in common. Okay. 1872, Aaron Montgomery started his first single page mail order catalog for Montgomery Wards, right? Okay. 1893, first brownies were invented in this area. Okay. 1926 route 66 was established. Okay. 1930. Let's look at the first Motorola car radio. Okay was installed. 1942 first self sustaining nuclear chain reaction was achieved. Okay. 1943. Yeah. The invention of my favorite deep dish Pete. Oh, yes. 1964, Michelle Obama was born here. OK. 1901, Walt Disney was born here. OK. 2010, it was the world's first tallest building designed by a female architect was completed. Love it. And today's guest, 1987, they were established. What do all these things have in common, Katherine? I don't know. Chicago.

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00:02:14 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Oh, I like it. But hey, I've got a correction for you on that one.

00:02:17 **Doug Buchan**

Which one?

00:02:18 **Katherine Lehtinen**

It was 1981. Was it really? Yes, those glasses. I think you need to adjust it. But it is quite incredible that an organization known as the Chicago Women in the Trades started in 1981 and has done amazing things and continues to grow in the Winnie City, which is not too far from us here in Cleveland. And today we have our guest, Renee Jones, who is the program director. Welcome, Renee.

00:02:44 **Renee Jones**

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to share our story with you all.

00:02:50 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yes, I love it. Well, we did talk just a little bit about kind of your background and being electrician. So talk to us a little bit about what inspired you to get involved in the Chicago Women in the Trades and what was your journey from an electrician to here and what you're doing now?

00:03:08 **Renee Jones**

Okay, well I do have a fascinating story to me because I grew up on the west side of Chicago and went to college and received a college degree and was working in the social service field for a good maybe five or six years when I volunteered for my agency with Habitat for Humanity. And when I was volunteering, I was working alongside some electricians and they were telling me what they made as opposed to what I was making. And they kept saying, you should come and be an electrician. And I was like, no, I got my college degree, I don't need. But that thought was in my head because I discovered that I like working with my hands. I discovered I was good at

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working with my hands during that short time of volunteering. So that thought stayed with me for about two years. And when I was off work, in between jobs, I was, a friend of mine told me, she remembered me saying how I loved that experience. And she was like, well, they have a pre -apprentice program. It's another group that had a pre -apprentice

00:04:15 **Renee Jones**

program for women. And I joined them to find out, to explore more the possibility of becoming an electrician. And that led me to applying, learning about all the careers and similar to what we do here. And I applied and became an electrician. And it was such a wonderful journey.

00:04:34 **Katherine Lehtinen**

And now how many years were you a practicing electrician?

00:04:38 **Renee Jones**

16 and then I decided when the recession came I had to step out and I went back to my social service background Sure, and that brought me full circle to becoming the director at Chicago Women in Trade the director program

00:04:53 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, so how did you get connected with this role? Did someone reach out or was it that you saw a posting? How'd that happen?

00:04:59 **Renee Jones**

Yes, I was at another social service agency and I was feeling like I had outgrown my role there. And so when they had put my arrest mail in deed and this job opportunity popped up, and I said, hmm, maybe I'll apply because I had not heard of them, unfortunately. Even though I was in the field, I didn't think I'd recall people mentioned they were from Chicago Women in Trade, but I just applied without nothing of it. this was the first time my

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resume completely fit a job. Yeah, absolutely. Management of programs, my college degree, and being a tradeswoman fit this job directly. And it's wonderful because it's a pre -apprentice program that like similar to what I went through. And as I see women coming into a program, I could relate to every step of their journey. Yeah. So I love that part of my job because I get goosebumps when they actually complete it and start their journey into a career in whatever trade that they select.

00:06:06 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Oh, I bet. Can you elaborate then for us a little bit more on Chicago Women in Trade's mission and the impact it has on opening doors for women in traditionally male -dominated fields?

00:06:18 **Renee Jones**

We were founded in 1981, and our mission then was to improve women's economic equity in increasing their participation in high -skilled wage jobs, and those jobs that were traditionally held by men. So that was the goal. They were founded by a group of women that were mostly carpenters, but they sat around to decide that they were going to teach each other skills that they were not longing on the job. So that was the first they would meet, have little potluck dinners, and decide to say, hey, we're going to teach ourselves what we were being excluded out of in the all -boys network when it came to training. So as they were training themselves, the group began to grow. In 1987, we were funded to actually do a training program. And that was when we decided to start our Technical Opportunity Program, TOP, which

00:07:15 **Katherine Lehtinen**

which

00:07:15 **Renee Jones**

was a night program that held on Tuesdays and Thursdays and field trips on Saturdays, where we teach women, we improve their math skills, we improve their ability to read blueprints, give them mechanical reasoning, and do training that will help them pass their apprenticeship school's test, entry test, and physically, give them a

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physical fitness workout so they can pass the physical test as well. So we've been doing that for over 40 years. our program has grown to include, we have a welding program, which is in the daytime, which meets Monday through Friday. We have a Women Build Illinois program, which is a morning program as well that meets Monday through Thursday. And each of these programs, we give women the opportunity to learn about careers in the trade. And also, if they want to do welding in manufacturing areas, they can also do that. But we want them to learn as much as possible of their choices that they have that they normally would not learn when they're out in school or when

00:08:18 **Renee Jones**

they're even in the public, you don't get to hear about you could be an electrician or you could be a welder. Even to this day, you know, we are not, high school counselors are not directing students towards careers that can really actually pay them decent wages without having to owe college loans, you know, you don't have to take out a loan to be able to start your career in a trade. As Doug well know, you can go straight into trades and not pay anything but besides what is owed about due applications, fees, and dues. In college, you have an astronomical bill when you graduate. And when you're in a career in a trade, you learn as you get paid, as you progress in your career. So it's a great opportunity and we do phenomenal work with graduating women and sending them out for their choices of careers in this right we are so I'm so happy to be a part of that journey yeah what is your

00:09:18 **Katherine Lehtinen**

current success rate of like in your welding program how many students do you have in that program and then what's their success rate to going into their

00:09:27 **Renee Jones**

next step well for our welding program our classes for weldings are smaller okay because of the stations we have to have for them so we have been anywhere anywhere between 10 to 12. We have a 99 % graduation rate for our welding program. That's awesome. Yeah, and it's really good because not only do some of them are set

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up for manufacturing jobs, but a lot of them choose to be in the plumbing, pipe fitter, or sprinkler fitter field in which those welding skills would also do them well to give them some advantage. And we do, not only do we have these classes, these programs, our welding class, our top and Women Build Illinois, our day program of construction, preparing people for construction careers. But we do specialty class. We partner with the carpenters. We have a partnership with the carpenters, Mid -America Carpenters. We have a partnership with District 14, the Painters Organization. We have a partnership also with the iron workers now where we have specialty all -women class.

00:10:31 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Okay.

00:10:32 **Renee Jones**

And so when they, because we want direct entry for women that we know that they apply regularly, they are up against maybe a thousand other applicants and most of them are men. We want to have a direct entry so we make sure that we are diversifying the field as much as possible and giving them the advantage of being able to become employed and placed in that career or in that apprenticeship program. So the all -women carpenter class, We had two last year and we have been successful enough with the conferences that we have raised the population of women in that local from 5 % to 15%.

00:11:13 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Wow, that's amazing.

00:11:17 **Renee Jones**

The same with the iron workers too. So we are so proud of the lead weight that we're getting into getting these women into career paths because as an electrician, I was the only woman on the job.

00:11:31 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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Yes, absolutely. I know you probably dealt with this as you were an electrician and you were just kind of alluding to it. But, you know, what are some of the biggest challenges that women do face when entering into the trades? And how does the Chicago Women in Trades program help address them with that need?

00:11:49 **Renee Jones**

Okay, there's a variety of challenges. When a person enters our program, because we know if we don't meet those challenges, as they come through our program, those are the same challenges that's not going to make them successful in the field when they get out there. So we meet with them and have one-on-one assessments immediately. How is your child care set up? Do you have family support for that? Because a lot of times, a woman is the main person that is relied on to take care of not only their children, but even elderly parents. They're the person that's the support person in their home. So, those are one of the barriers that we try to make sure they have extra support for. Childcare is something we cannot resolve the issue for, but we can also make sure they know your family support is needed in this area, so if there's not a childcare place that opens up early enough, you have some backup, or when your child gets sick, you have backup, so that you won't be called away from the job

00:12:53 **Renee Jones**

as often, because it's important. and we will have to miss dates more often than maybe our male counterparts because we have to go pick up that child and do the childcare for that. So that's a hard problem to resolve, but we try to make sure we actually have the family in there with commitments that they will be part of their support team so that happens. So that's one of the barriers. The other barriers is sometimes fees and being able to pay fees or buy tools. and those are the things that we do. We will support, we will pay for their fees, we will pay for their dues, we buy their boots. We have a council of women from each of the trades that come and meet here, and they actually help support the organization. They're one of the mechanisms of support for our agency as well. That's our magic. All the tradeswomen that come back, they build a closet and come and donate clothes and boots and gear for students. So, when they're going into the field, even after they've been in there for a while,

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00:13:55 **Renee Jones**

they can always come back here and shop for anything they need, rain gear, boots, or what have you, because we pass on equipment and things that's likely used for them to have. Those are some of the ways that we try to help with barriers, but also, because we know we're in a field where there is harassment, there are things that work against you. You may need extra training. We work with our, not only our students that have come through here, but we do workshops like stepping up to foreman, train a trainer, mental health, things to support them so that they're, you know, if they're having problems in the field, we have the resources to make sure we're assisting them. And we check in on them. We have a retention specialist that check in on our students to make sure that they're, you know, if they have any issues or problems they could come back and make sure we try to do something to help resolve their issues. That's awesome, that's awesome. You

00:14:53 **Doug Buchan**

know I I was fortunate enough to to go onto your website and I was looking through it and I recommend to everybody they visit your website. I think it's well put together. One of the things that I remember as I was looking at it was some of the success stories that they had. Right. And they had a young lady on there, Emma Williams. And I loved her little bio. It said that she was a cashier at the age of 21. And she's like, I'm

00:15:16 **Katherine Lehtinen**

over this. Yeah, yeah, you figure out real fast what you

00:15:19 **Doug Buchan**

don't want to do. Absolutely. So she came down and she started her journey, you know, into the trades. Renee, you have a tremendous amount of supporters and you have partners, you know, I see all that on your website. And I see the 120 180 hours, you know, 12 week courses that you offer. I also noticed that your affiliation with the unions are very heavy, you know, which is fantastic. Question for you, for those folks who maybe want to

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stay out of the union sector, maybe go into that private general contractor type of area, what type of affiliation do you have with contractors in your area that aren't affiliated with the unions?

00:16:01 **Renee Jones**

Well, you know, we encourage, of course, that they go with union contractors because they're protected with pay and advancement and it's one place, especially as a woman, you're going to get paid the same as the person next to you. We do have people that go with non -union contractors to find work, but it's not like most of the people that come through the program go into the apprenticeship programs, but a lot of our welding students are working in some manufacturers that could be non -union. But our encouragement is that we know that the union is best for benefit and is better for longevity or being able to advance from first year, second year, and third year, fourth year, because they have strict curriculum that they abide by. And if you're not protected by the union, you might not get the same benefits. You might not get the same pay raise. And not saying that there are issues sometimes with unions, but I think that's a better

00:17:03 **Doug Buchan**

route for them to go. Sure. Absolutely, you always have that protection and like you said a female in the trades, it's it's not a common thing

00:17:11 **Katherine Lehtinen**

They're behind just as they enter the system. We're taking a slight break to spotlight an amazing organization Explore the trades. Did you know that skilled trades like plumbing, heating, cooling and electrical Work to keep our country running? These careers are in high demand, offer great pay, job security and real opportunities for growth Explore the Trades is on a mission to introduce the next generation of these essential fields. Because these careers aren't just a choice, they're the best choice. If you want to learn more, come check out our interview on [od .com backslash the fix](https://od.com/backslash/the-fix) or head over to [explorethetrades .org](https://explorethetrades.org). And if you're an educator, you can even grab free classroom posters today to inspire students. Now back to our episode.

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00:18:01 **Doug Buchan**

Well, it sounds like you have a tremendous amount of support from the unions, which I think is a fantastic thing.

00:18:07 **Renee Jones**

We have a great support with them because for our evening classes on Saturdays, they do field trips for hands - on experience. They go to the conferences one Saturday, they go to the painters another Saturday, the electricians, they go to the laborers, they go to the sheet metal workers, they go to the bricklayers. So we make sure they know because they come into the class a lot of times not knowing anything about the careers in the trade. And when they go and do a hands -on experience, we always tell them the tools sometimes speak to you and let you know this is something I really want to do. They could come in and say, oh, all I've heard about carpenters is I want to be a carpenter. And they get out there and they may pick up a hand on camera and say, yes, this is me. But they may also pick up a fender block and say, oh, you know what? I really love doing this. So, we make sure, along with the union locals, they give us the time, they give us the space in their places for our students

00:19:04 **Renee Jones**

to come visit and get these hands -on experience. Because in the daytime, they'll go a week at the conferences, a week at the electricians, a week at the ironworkers, and they're treated so well from these locals, Local 63, Mid -America conferences, Local 134, they give them a week of working, hands -on experience, and even District 14 take the time out to give them experience so that they'll know what it takes, what are the different careers to be a painter, what are the different careers as a conference. We took an all -women millwright class through our partnerships with Mid -America Conferences. we had 10 women that graduated from the all -women class, 10 that entered, 10 that graduated. And they came out and told us, you all have doubled the number of women in our local, just with that class. Just with that. Wow. Yeah, so it's a really amazing experience when they even realize how necessary it is to put attention to these diverse groups that may not have the opportunity any other way.

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00:20:14 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Right, yeah. And part of it, I would imagine, was you also educating some of these groups into the union and of what the needs women have. And maybe it is a little bit different, but they also are doing the exact same work. You just got to maybe think about things differently as well.

00:20:31 **Renee Jones**

And we get goosebumps when we get calls from the union and let us know. We have the Anne Wicks that told us, one of our students, that they just put to work. She would, before they could find her, place her, she would go up to the union hall and practice her welding. And so she's out in the field killing it. And they called us to brag about her and say she's doing such wonderful work. So we're proud because we know that there are women that are hungry to be good in their craft and to prove they can do it just as much, just as well as a man could. And we have a lot of students that graduate that have that type of attitude. so we are proud of them. There are so many success stories that will give you goosebumps because people come here from working at Walmart, Amazon, McDonald's, Mariano's in the bakery, and they're making 17, 18, or 19 dollars. And for them to come back, we had one mail writer come back to show us a check she made for one week, like \$6 ,000, so she's making overtime, to

00:21:34 **Renee Jones**

know the impact of that woman's check Her four little girls, it's amazing. So we're so proud to know that we are changing people's lives in a trajectory that will last for generations. And we're so proud to see that happening. And through each graduation class, we have some type of success story to back that up. So we're happy about those things.

00:22:00 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I love it. I told you, Doug, I've been wanting them on this show for a long time just so that we could share all this great story and just hear about it. because I could see it unraveling as I follow on LinkedIn and social media and your websites. And I mean, I love that because I just truly believe a lot of it sometimes is one person, one group,

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one town, one city at a time, and it takes that. I mean, just the work that you're doing and what it's doing to just change industries and changing percentages and changing someone's life. It's so impactful. It's awesome.

00:22:35 **Renee Jones**

It always takes you meeting people that may be different from you. Yes. Working with them to change your perspective on who a person is, how they work, and your ideal of where they should be at. I've been told a lot of times as a woman in the field, as an electrician, oh, you shouldn't be here. But it's my skills and my ability to work that change people's minds.

00:23:02 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, absolutely.

00:23:03 **Renee Jones**

And we do that all the time. We have this wonderful company for welding, Ralph H. Simpson, that have our welding students come out and they stop their production line so our students could join and learn what they do. And they were so proud of what we did through these field trips that they even hired a student of ours. So it's those type of connections and partnerships that really make people understand that you're missing out on a big chunk of segment of people who can work. Don't just look at the male population, look at women because we can do it.

00:23:40 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Absolutely. So, Renee, how do you think most women come to you? Meaning, how do they hear about the program? Is it because of a family member or a friend? Or how do they know that, hey, there's an opportunity, I'm going to leave my job at McDonald's and I'm going to go in and try this out?

00:23:58 **Renee Jones**

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You know, a lot of it is word of mouth. We've been around since 1981. So a lot is word of mouth, but we also have our tradeswomen that pass out flyers. I have them in my car. If I go through a drive -thru, I'm always sticking it in the window saying, you may need to change your career. Come see us. It's through social media. We have a marketing team that puts things out on social media. But people, and usually our average age is between 27 and 32. And at that point, people are looking at where they're at in their lives, what else can I do? So some people have told us they have Googled the information and found out about us. And those are our most successful students because they're at a point where they may be at Walmart or any other places that's not going to pay them well and say, you know what, I'm getting older. I need to do something that's going to bring me something. Now, our young people, we have people that are 19 that have graduated out of school. we don't have a big selection

00:24:54 **Renee Jones**

of contingency of 19 -year -olds, and we love to change that. But when we get them, I tell them, you're at a young age and you're about to start making money and building your fund for retirement. If a good thing, stick with it. And because a lot of times, you know, you're young, you want to do some of everything and not make commitments. But our 27 to 30 CEOs mostly at that point in life where they're looking at their lives and say, I need to do something more.

00:25:22 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, it makes sense.

00:25:23 **Doug Buchan**

You know what I love about this conversation is, you know, Renee and her organization is giving these young women opportunities for a career. I mean, anybody can have a job. You know, Emma, the success story I looked at, OK? Anybody can get a job. Let's look at the career and your communications and your instilling in them that, hey, this is not a today thing. This is a forever thing. I just think that's absolutely fantastic.

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00:25:49 **Katherine Lehtinen**

So, as we kind of wrap up here today, I have one last final question for you. I mean, I feel like we can talk for another hour easily, but we'll have to do that. Maybe Doug, let's go to Chicago.

00:26:03 **Renee Jones**

That would be so wonderful because you can see us in action. That would be really nice.

00:26:09 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Don't tempt us. That's a drive, Doug. But as we leave this conversation, I would love for you just to kind of step back and think about what are your hopes for the future of Chicago women in the trades, and how can others get involved in supporting your mission with this program?

00:26:27 **Renee Jones**

OK, so our hope is that all the apprentice schools and unions will be more receptive to women in their training programs and give us the numbers to place them in there. And we want to one day eradicate the word non-traditional jobs. This is a traditional job, and it should be a traditional job for anyone who has the ability and skills to do it. So we hope to increase the number of women in the field, and that's what we do with our graduations. We hope to increase their placements, not only graduate them, but get them placed in these apprenticeship programs. We want these doors to open up a lot wider so we can increase the number of women in there. Because there's going to be a chunk of people retiring and this is a good selection of people to tap into for the work. So when we have laborers off work and carpenters off work, we're doing our best to try to make sure we find companies and contractors that's going to hire them. And if anyone out there that are contractors, please contact us

00:27:38 **Renee Jones**

because we do have a list of people that are unemployed that we need to place in jobs, so we would love for that connection to happen. And they could go to our website too if they want to donate to our organization.

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There is a place where they can go to our website and do that as well. But we would love for us to be connected with every contractor when they need to work for us, call us. because our conferences and labors are very skilled people who can be placed on jobs.

00:28:07 **Doug Buchan**

Awesome. No doubt in my mind, they're very competent people.

00:28:10 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yep, absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Renee, for taking the time today. We've learned so much and Doug and I will probably hit you up on making sure we come out to Chicago sometime. So thank

00:28:20 **Doug Buchan**

you. Get that deep dish pizza. We'd love to have you.

00:28:24 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Thanks, Renee. Thanks, Renee.

00:28:26 **Doug Buchan**

Thank you.