

You belong in the trades

Committees and collective agreements becoming more inclusive through language

**BUILD
TOGETHER**
WOMEN OF THE BUILDING TRADES

By Corry Anderson-Fennell

WHEN CHELSEA FRENCH looked around the room at their first Build Together meeting, two things struck them:

Build Together, the women's committee of the BC Building Trades, was mostly made up of people with clearly European ancestry. And Build Together being a women's committee, French, whose pronouns are they/them, wasn't entirely sure they belonged.

"Being part of Build Together, I have always felt welcomed and included as a member of the women's committee," said French. "However, I always felt like I was a fraud. As someone who was struggling with my gender identity, it was hard to be held in that gender box in order to help, support and advocate for women in the trades."

A little over two years later, Build Together BC has the distinction of being the first and only chapter in Canada whose membership has been expanded to Building Trades members who either identify as a woman in the trades, or who have experience as a woman in the trades. That means membership includes people who are transgender and gender diverse – people who are underrepresented in the skilled trades and are surely exposed to the same discrimination, bullying and harassment faced by tradeswomen.

Further, Build Together started a diversity subcommittee last year to try to address its lack of cultural diversity and reserved a minimum of two executive seats to people residing outside the Lower Mainland. Today the committee has two directors who are Indigenous, two directors from the Interior, and one director from the North Coast.

And French, who co-chairs Build Together with Ashley Duncan, most definitely feels like they belong.

"When the language was changed, I finally felt like this really was a place for me and that me being who I was, belonged. Because of the support of the Build Together members and this language change, I was finally able to publicly share my authentic self without the fear of rejection I had been struggling with."

Build Together is not alone in recognizing the phenomenal power that words have. Members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Locals 213, 230, 993 and 1003 will have noticed gender-neutral terminology in their newest collective agreement. For starters, it's called the Inside Electrical Workers Agreement instead of the Inside Wiremen's Agreement. Previous references to himself have been changed to themselves, while foreman, serviceman and journeyman are



Chelsea French

now called chargehand, service electrician and journey electrician, respectively.

These simple, typed words on a page carry enormous meaning, as far as IBEW Local 213's Becky Lupton is concerned. Unit 2 chair and a member of the local's electrical workers' minority caucus, Lupton says those few simple changes combine to create equity within the collective agreement.

"Language matters," says Lupton. "It carries with it the weight in words that conveys things like implicit bias, the attitudes or stereotypes that shape our immediate reactions to individuals."

Many other professions long ago abandoned gender-laden titles, trading policeman, fireman and mailman for police officer, firefighter and letter carrier; meanwhile, municipal government is now led by councillors rather than aldermen.

Lupton expects it will take time before folks are fluent in the new terms, and some may complain the task is too difficult, but she's absolutely confident it will ultimately happen.

"Learning a trade is difficult but we all became electricians," she points out. "When it matters, the effort is made and a great many things are possible."

She adds, "if there is the earnest intent to represent all workers, then we as a union should do so in a manner that is respectful of the power of words and their meaning." So how have the changes been received so far? IBEW Local 213 dispatcher Emelia Colman-Shepherd and business representative Sandra Brynjolfson are thrilled. For Brynjolfson, they were the culmination of years of advocacy by underrepresented groups.

"I was elated," said Brynjolfson. "Language is powerful and in order to be inclusive, we need to choose words that are reflective of that. Nobody wants to feel left out."

Colman-Shepherd is unabashedly blunt in her approval: "I was freaking ecstatic when I heard about it! I couldn't believe this was actually a thing. To feel included is amazing." Colman-Shepherd cites a vast body of academic research showing how language shapes the way people think. When words disappear from language, we don't think about the object they referred to, and the opposite is also true.

"Think of the difference in language changes we've already made as a society. Nobody would think of a woman when the word fireman is said, but now that the vast majority of us use the term firefighter or first responder, anyone could be doing that job." — With files from Todd Nickel 