

# Making A Statement for Women

Despite the fact women have worked as welders for decades, Beverly Gallagher still feels like a pioneer. Partly it's because she realizes women welders remain something of a rarity, but mostly it's because she must continually prove to the men she works with she can handle the job.

Since 1978, Gallagher has worked through Boilermakers Local 524 at Union Tank Car Co. in East Chicago, Ind., helping to build railroad tank cars. "Being a Boilermaker since 1978 and a welder of stick, MIG, TIG, and submerged arc, I still have to prove myself again and again to this day," she said. "Men can't quite believe women can perform a job and do it well."

It happens each time she moves into a new department. While she acknowledges proving one's worth is something all new workers on a job must do, male or female, Gallagher maintains women must prove themselves to a much greater degree. "What I've run into time and time again is you have to prove you're not just some smiling idiot who just wanted to work out there for the money and figured the men would help you or you would be given an easy job because you're a woman," she said.

Gallagher became a welder somewhat by chance. In 1978, she was a clinical psychology major working her way through college by tending bar across the street from Union Tank Car. She kept asking the foremen who were her customers if there were any jobs she could do at the tank car builder. "I kept badgering them until finally one of them brought me in an application and where it said 'job desired,' I asked him what I was supposed to put down," she recalled. "The man said, 'Welder trainee,' so I went to the welding school at Union Tank Car and the rest is history."

## Taking Advantage of Their Sex

Currently, about 200 people work at Union Tank Car's East Chicago facility, the majority of whom hold some sort of welder classification. Gallagher is the only woman Boilermaker left in Local 524 and employed at the plant. A downturn in business at the end of last year resulted in four other women being laid off and in Gallagher's reclassification from manipulator/operator to fitter/welder. For the 13 years she was a manipulator/operator, Gallagher's primary responsibility was welding seams

on the tank cars. In her current capacity, she fits and welds various pieces, such as parts to the brake assemblies, onto the cars.

There were approximately ten women welders working at the plant when Gallagher joined the company in 1978, women who had learned to weld during World War II and who were nearing retirement. While there has never been a large number of women welders working at the facility at any one time, Gallagher has seen a number of them come and go over the years. Much of what she's seen she hasn't liked.

"Some use their gender as an excuse for special treatment," she said. Gallagher has seen other women flirt with their male coworkers, stand too close to them, or actually rub against them in order to be assigned easier tasks or get men to help them do their jobs. She's watched others whine, cry, or claim they were being discriminated against because of their gender.

These actions have angered Gallagher because she believes these women have only made it more difficult for her and other women who only want to do the job they were hired for. "They are gone now, but their actions live on to make it difficult for hardworking women. I would like to see more women in the trade, but they shouldn't expect special treatment. I've seen it too many times and it gives women like me or the other women out there in the trades who do a good job and don't depend upon anyone to help them or do the job for them...a bad name."

## Advice for Others

Life on the job hasn't always been easy for Gallagher. In the early years, coworkers sometimes accused her of "taking a job away from a man" or asked her "Why aren't you home baking pies and cookies?" The attitudes of men supposed to train her ranged from one who refused to speak to her to others who were overly helpful to the point of being



**Beverly Gallagher on the job at Union Tank Car Co., East Chicago, Ind.**

condescending. Yet Gallagher doesn't want to sound negative about her job.

Initially interested in welding only to make more money, she eventually came to feel a higher calling. "After I became more involved with the job, I felt I was making a statement for women," Gallagher believes she has contributed toward letting people know women have the intelligence and physical capabilities to perform a job such as welding and is proud she has chosen an untraditional career. The sight of a tanker on a railroad track fills her with pride because she knows she helped build it.

And, perhaps ironically, she has stuck with welding all these years in large part because of the men she works with. "I like the people I work with," Gallagher said. "I feel at ease with them, and we have a good time kidding around."

She would encourage other women to enter welding, but only those of a certain type. Women who are "independent, self-starters, physically strong, and who won't take no for an answer" are best suited for a career in welding, Gallagher believes.

Her advice to women wanting to enter the field: "Don't take any crap from the guys. Just know how to do your job and know how to do it well. Know yourself and be yourself. Know your strengths and weaknesses."

Gallagher's plans for her own future? "I'm just going to stay out there as an hourly employee and just keep plugging away in my own little way proving to people that women can do a man's job." ♦