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## Diversifying the worksite



*Aylee Estock-Annen, Julie Boucher, and Lily Thompson (l-r), all members of the carpenters' union, Local 108*

**By Keely Savoie**

On an unseasonably cool day recently, the construction site of the new Community Center was bustling with workers laboring to finish the building's exterior so that work could begin on the innards — plumbing, electric and mechanics.

Over the newly poured slab of concrete, which will be the subflooring of the completed addition, strode Lily Thompson, a member of the carpenters' union, Local 108. She is one of several female construction workers on-site every day at the Community Center. Thompson was joined by two other women members of the union, Julie Boucher and Aylee Estock-Annen, all of western Massachusetts.

"I've been in the business 14 years and often I've been the only woman on a job," Thompson said. "When I came here, I was like, 'Holy Gadzooks! I'm not the only one.'"

### **Setting benchmarks, breaking down barriers**

It's not a coincidence that Thompson encountered more women on the community construction site than she had ever seen in her past work.

In undertaking the construction of the expanded Community Center, Mount Holyoke partnered with New England Carpenters Labor Management Program and Shawmut Design and Construction to implement a requirement that 7 percent of workers must be female.

It might not sound like a lot, but 7 percent is more than double Massachusetts' average of 3 percent — and more than triple the national average of about 2 percent — according to Lisa Clauson. Clauson works for the New England Carpenters Labor Management Program to arrange strategic partnerships between the union and contractors who hire its members. The Community Center project also set a 16 percent requirement for employing minorities.

“Having these goals in place makes a huge difference in opportunities for women and women of color in the construction trades,” said Clauson.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been implementing diversity goals since 2011. The practice has a real impact. Six years later, the representation of women apprentices in the construction trades has grown from 3 to 7 percent.

Mount Holyoke is the first private institution in the regions of central and western Massachusetts to set diversity requirements for a construction site.

“We are always thinking about how we implement our mission as widely as possible,” said Shannon Gurek, Mount Holyoke’s vice president for finance and administration. “Ensuring that women are involved in the construction of this building is something very important to Mount Holyoke.”

For Boucher, who dreamed of being a carpenter since she was four years old, having other women on the job site has made an enormous difference in her daily experience.

“It’s comforting to have other women around who can share your perspective and experiences,” she said. “I’m so grateful to Mount Holyoke for setting standards for employing women — and setting an example for the greater community.”

## **Living the mission**

Casey Accardi ’15, a member of the College’s Board of Trustees, sees Mount Holyoke’s commitment to employing more women in construction as part of its greater mission to advance opportunities for women globally.

“To me this is a really powerful way that Mount Holyoke is living its mission,” said Accardi. “It’s not just about the experience of students on campus, it’s about the experience of everyone who is helping build the Community Center. This building will be a central part of the campus for hundreds of years, and ensuring diversity in the workers who build it is a way to carry our mission forward into the next centuries.”

Linda (Giannasi) O’Connell ’69, president of the Mount Holyoke Club of Pioneer Valley, was initially uncertain whether the Community Center would give future generations of students the same intimate sense of connectedness that she had experienced during her tenure at Mount Holyoke. But she was won over by the College’s promise to embed its core values into the building itself.

“The work the College has done in helping promote women through the construction of the Community Center is phenomenal,” O’Connell said. “Now we can spin it forward as a vehicle of awareness and education and support for women’s economic justice in the workforce.”

Clauson sees diversifying the construction workforce as a vehicle for expanding women’s economic freedom.

“When you work in union construction you earn a very livable wage, you earn health insurance and retirement benefits,” she said. “You can support your family. It’s an area that should be more broadly available to women and people of color.”

In the end, the Community Center will leave a lasting mark on the College and the surrounding community in myriad ways, but perhaps most saliently, by propelling the foundational Mount Holyoke ethos of Mary Lyon into the future, said O’Connell.

“Mary Lyon said, ‘Go where no one else would go, do what no one else would do.’ to make strides into this traditionally male field is very much like what she would do — and what she did do, in founding Mount Holyoke College,” O’Connell said. “It’s terrifically aligned with Mount Holyoke’s mission. As a woman’s college, our goal is no boundaries and no barriers to women’s achievement.”