

High School Junior Discovers Opportunities for Women in Construction at Rogers

By Irene Wazgowska, CEFGA Feature Writer

At five-feet, two-inches and ninety pounds, 18 year old La Xiong is a proclaimed "ball of fire." Whether in class or on site she's an energetic learner.

So it's no surprise this native of Thailand is on her way to a promising career.

While attending foreign language courses at Walton Career Academy her junior year, La found herself intrigued as she passed by the construction room on her way to class. She thought what the students were doing, "looked like fun."

La admits that for a moment she "thought it was just a guy thing, and that maybe [she] shouldn't consider it." But as soon as doubt crossed her mind, it quickly passed.

La was encouraged by Brooke West, a peer who was a rare sight in the male dominated construction courses. She says that Brooke "stepped up and did her thing," which inspired La to do the same.



La approached the construction teacher, Paul Campanella, who told her that gender didn't matter, and that there was no need for concern.

Even though she "was afraid," she says that it's a "good thing [she] did it."

Campanella recalls how as a student, La "had perfect attendance, no tardies." This dedication and "her great work ethic," led to her becoming Team Member of the Quarter, a member of SkillsUSA, and the willingness of Campanella to "put [his] name behind her," for a summer internship with CEFGA. She was a "top performer," a "pleasure to have," and "she excelled in everything she did."

La's initial apprehensions about getting into construction no longer existed as she was continually reminded that there are "many opportunities for women in construction."

Once again, La has found herself a rarity. This time it's on the Sunrise Assisted Living site she's working on with Rogers Construction Company. Since graduating from Monroe High School this past May, La has been on the site after being chosen as a summer intern by Rogers' Risk Manager and Field Operations Coordinator, Ricky Vickery.



Ricky recalls how he had three internship slots to fill. He knew he wanted to take La on, but it was not until she consulted with her parents and got back to him, that she became part of the Rogers team.

Ricky mentions that when it came to choosing La, she came highly recommended, even her fellow interns spoke highly of her, saying "she can work as hard as anyone, if not more so."

On her current job, La works as a carpenter's assistant, finding herself getting involved in anything she can get her hands on. She's done some wood blocking, as well as trim, porch and wood framing work, installed PTAC sleeves, driven a bobcat, and has gotten her OSHA-required forklift license. As her Superintendent on the project, Mark Kennedy says, La: "is very interested in learning and being involved," she likes "to know what makes things come together."

Gary Gruber, La's mentor on the job, reiterates La's commitment to the craft: "she's a hard worker, always asking questions and wants to continue to learn." He's pleased to have her on the crew and credits the CEFGA Summer Internship Program, saying "it's great."

La "can't believe" she's on a construction site. She didn't "imagine" that she'd be where she is. And neither did her parents.

La's parents hoped she would go into nursing. They thought it was a practical career choice, one she'd find success in. At first there was concern about her getting involved in the construction industry, let alone participating in the internship. But La told them that it was what she wanted to do and that she was going to do it.

When La starts this fall semester at Perimeter College, she'll be working towards a degree in business, she's got the support of everyone, most importantly her parents.

"[La] is small in stature, but big in heart and the desire to accomplish her goals." It is seldom that a young person displays attributes of such high quality as those shown by Ms. Xiong. She will do well in her pursuit of a career in the construction industry, regardless of what path she chooses to follow, be it in management or in the trades."

It won't be a surprise then, when La makes use of her education and is the one calling the shots.

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