

Construction apprenticeships for women

‘You just get stuck in and show them you can do the job.’

The construction industry is often stereotyped as a sector dominated by men with hairy chests and a sexist attitude. A Hertfordshire-based building firm is running a programme that convincingly counters that myth, and also shows that apprenticeships need not be just badly-paid ‘work experience’.

Durkan Group has a proud tradition of providing both top quality apprenticeships, as well as targeting women, ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged groups, such as young people leaving care.

‘The idea that apprenticeships are for the “class room dunce” is long gone,’ explains Paul McCrea, Durkan’s Community Liaison Manager.

‘Our apprenticeship programme is very professional - everyone has to pass exams. It’s the equivalent to an A-Level when completed,’ he continues.

Each year Durkan take on about seven apprentices, about a third of whom are usually female and at least one is from an ethnic minority.

Their three-year apprenticeship provides comprehensive training in all the construction trades, including carpentry, joinery, electrician, plumbing, and brick laying. The apprentices spend time at college and are provided with mentors and help, if needed, in education.

McCrea says: ‘We pay a good salary to our apprentices - they start on about £170 to £200 a week. By the time they finish the

apprenticeship this will rise to £250 to £300. We also pay their college fees.

‘It’s important for our apprenticeships to be attractive - we want young people to know that they are entering a career that pays well.’

Durkan, a group of companies involved in construction, development and regeneration in south east England and Ireland, also offers a range of training schemes, and bursaries for young care leavers to study in further and higher education. In addition the company provides mentoring and works with schools, community groups, local authorities and others to engage with local communities, in particular young people and those who are socially disadvantaged.

In total they have recruited and helped train and educate about 200 teenage girls and women since 2001.

Eighteen-year-old Kristina Ross, from Thames Mead in south east London, fulfilled her ambition to become a carpenter like her father, when she began an apprenticeship with Durkan at the age of 16.

She recalls: ‘No one at school told me about apprenticeships - it was my mum that told me. I started straight from school, I always liked working with my hands and was interested in carpentry because of my dad. I thought it was a good way of getting qualifications and getting paid at the same time - otherwise I would have just left school at 16, and I don’t suppose I would have got much of a job.’

The young woman recently qualified with



distinction and hopes to become a full time carpenter once her apprenticeship ends in June.

The teenager says she has not had any problem being one of the few women on a construction site. ‘You just get stuck in and show them you can do the job,’ she explains.

McCrea stresses that the image of wolf-whistling, sexist building workers has no place at Durkan. ‘We have a zero tolerance policy towards anyone trying to undermine women in construction.’

Part of Durkan’s approach is to target disadvantaged communities in which they work, including housing associations.

McCrea explains: ‘This often involves youngsters who would have dropped out of education. Not every young person has the ability to do academic study, or the circumstances at home mean they may to become a bread winner at a very early age.’

So far all their apprentices have ended up

working for Durkan, or one of their contractors, or set up their own business.

David Lavoile, 22, whose mother is from Haiti, and father from the Ivory Coast, hopes one day to have his own electrical installation business, having nearly completed a three year apprenticeship with Durkan.

‘I heard about the apprenticeship from my housing association. The teachers at my school and sixth form were only really interested in pushing me towards university,’ says Lavoile.

He continues: ‘The apprenticeship has worked out really well. When I’m at college I can see the difference between myself and other students - I’ve got a real advantage because of the work experience I’ve had.’

On the question of why Durkan is taking such a socially responsible approach, McCrea’s response is simple: ‘It’s our contribution to putting something back into society. We also get excellent, well trained people to work for us.’