

It's like winning the lottery.

That is how Sonia Shepard of Davenport, Iowa, describes getting a job in construction.



"The life that I have now is amazing," she said.

Shepard graduated from Black Hawk College's [Highway Construction Careers Training Program](#) (HCCTP) in 2015.

"I'll never forget that day," she said of graduation. "It changed my life. That day defined the rest of my life."

HCCTP aims to increase the number of minorities, women and disadvantaged individuals working on Illinois Department of Transportation highway construction projects.

The 13-week class includes a mix of hands-on experiences and classroom work.

Now, Shepard is a journeyman carpenter for Carpenters Local 4 and works for the contractor Kraemer North America.

Her first construction project after HCCTP graduation was helping build the new bridge in Savanna.

At the time, life was tough. Shepard was homeless, but she knew starting a construction career would change everything.



Once she secured an apartment, the first thing she bought was a bed. It was her only piece of furniture.

"I had to get my sleep to do this job," Shepard said.

She's grateful for her stable income and great benefits, including a retirement account.

"My whole life I never thought I would have a retirement," she said.

Shepard was always interested in construction, but she didn't learn about HCCTP until her 40s.

Someone gave her the phone number for the program. She called and never looked back.

Shepard liked how HCCTP covered a little bit of everything, and she really enjoyed working

on a roof during the program.

The hands-on experiences and learning about various trades helped Shepard decide on carpentry, which she knows is the right fit for her.

She regularly returns to HCCTP classes to share her story with students.

"I want everybody to find their niche," Shepard said. "I want that for everybody."

HCCTP students study math, job/life skills, blueprint reading and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards.

The life skills portion also meant a lot to Shepard. In those sessions, the instructor focused on teamwork and making the right decisions.

She puts her training to use every day. Currently, she is helping construct the I-74 bridge approach in Moline.



Shepard loves that her co-workers feel like family and that safety is a big priority. She also enjoys figuring out solutions for anything unexpected that pops up.

"Sometimes it is like putting a puzzle together," she said.

Being detail-oriented is one of the strengths Shepard thinks women bring to construction.

"We need women in construction," she said.

For anyone interested in construction, Shepard recommends HCCTP.

"Don't be scared because it is awesome," she said.

## **Women in Construction Week is March 7-13, 2021.**

The [National Association of Women in Construction](#) (NAWIC) holds Women in Construction Week to promote women in construction.

## **Update 11-29-23**

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