

news

Low-income women learn practical skills

Woodworking in Downtown Eastside

By Sandra Thomas
Staff writer

A CARPENTER who teaches woodworking to women in the Downtown Eastside says the project was so successful she created a social enterprise around it.

"I started teaching them home improvement skills like how to patch dry-wall when you've put your fist through it and painting and a little bit of electrical and plumbing," said Kate Stewart, who's been a carpenter journeyman for 20 years. "Then I taught them a little bit of carpentry."

The home improvement course was sponsored by Tradeworks Training Society, a non-profit association that provides job-related skills, training, knowledge and work opportunities to people, particularly youth and women, living in the Downtown Eastside. Stewart said the women embraced the woodworking side of the project and designed boxes, bookshelves and furniture, including kitchen islands. "I guess they have really small kitchens or no kitchens at all, so these were really popular to build," said Stewart, who began working at Tradeworks five years ago. "They really let their imaginations roam."

But at the end of the 11-week course, said Stewart, the women had nowhere to go with their new skills.

"They had the skills and they had the confidence, but they had no work experience," said Stewart. "And a lot of them had been home looking after children and had no real resume."

That's when Stewart got the idea to



Carpenter Kate Stewart is introducing other women to her trade.

photo Dan Toulgoet

create Tradeworks Custom Products, a project that not only teaches women woodworking and social skills, but also how to run a business.

The project launched several weeks ago and four women are taking part. Stewart is looking for more women, who are low-income earners, interested in participating for the January program. Stewart said Rona, the home improvement store, and Concert Properties, also support the project. She notes Concert Properties has ordered hundreds of wooden tool boxes from the women.

Ross Gentleman, executive director of Tradeworks Training Society, said the goal is to teach the women woodworking and manufacturing and also to instill in them practical skills such as how to communicate with a supervisor and each other, what is expected of them at the workplace, the importance of showing up each day and how

to take direction. That lack of personal skills, said Gentleman, can be a barrier to employment.

"These women are returning to work after some sort of life trauma," he said. "Most of them live in the urban core and don't have a lot of employment skills."

Gentleman adds the women now need customers. Their goal is to sell to corporations or businesses that order in bulk and give the items as gifts. Single pieces can also be purchased, but there is no showroom to display the women's work. The price of the handcrafted items range from \$14 for a picture frame to \$59 for a large toy box.

Women interested in the program can call 604-253-9355, ext. 255, to see if they qualify for training.

That same number can be called for more information about purchasing merchandise.