As young women set out to enter skilled blue-collar jobs in the early twenty-first century, some of their experiences will echo those of their predecessors. Happily though, some won’t. Changes are taking place, albeit slowly. Margarita Suarez and Angela Olszewski speak for a younger generation of women working in the construction trades. Both project a sense of calm self-possession. One has an effervescent personality; the other is low-keyed. But the two young women have very different backgrounds and motives: blue-collar Angela was attracted by the trade; Margarita, a product of the middle class, was attracted by the challenge.

Angela Olszewski worked at any number of unskilled jobs before learning about the training program at Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW). After graduating from the 12-week pre-apprenticeship program, she went from a clerical position for the New York City Parks and Recreation Department to learning how to set tile. She brought the trade union principles she learned from her father to her new world. It would prove to be a valuable asset.

Margarita Suarez studied computer science in college and then went to work in the field. As she advanced in her career, she witnessed a steady progression of women in science and technology. In 2000, she left a high paid, comfortable position at Columbia University to go to work at NEW. Eventually she decided to take up a trade and applied to become an apprentice elevator mechanic.

Following their entrance into the skilled trades, their experiences on the job and in their unions, their achievements, the obstacles they face, and the organizing they undertake on behalf of other women add up to a contemporary, activist perspective on what remains a frontier for females.

A Circuitous Road to Elevator Mechanic

Margarita Suarez was born in Manila, Philippines, in 1967. When she was six months old, her parents migrated to Rochester, New York. At age 11, her family moved to Jacksonville,
Florida. After graduating from high school, she attended Columbia University, where she majored in computer science. In 1989, she went to work for Columbia:

Just as I was about to graduate [in 1989], I landed a full-time job as a systems programmer... That was a very nurturing environment. I had to learn everything. In fact, it was like an apprenticeship, except it wasn’t formal. It was on-the-job training. You’re basically thrown into some situations and you’re working with someone who is more experienced. You pick up tips and tricks and they instruct you. And you figure it out on your own.1

One year later, Suarez took advantage of the tuition exemption offered to Columbia University employees and enrolled in a master’s program in computer science through the School of Engineering. She had to supplement her liberal arts background with courses in statistics, probability, and mathematics. Even after completing this degree in 1994, she kept taking courses, studying Spanish and then earning a second B.A. in Women’s Studies. Soon after completing this program in 1998, her life took a different turn.

While working for Columbia University, Suarez used her vacation time to travel to other countries. Visiting Nicaragua as a tourist, she happened upon the small town of Cunedega. Here she learned that 10 years before, tradeswomen had set up a women’s construction cooperative. This group included women from New York City. She spent a few days in town as a volunteer: “They taught me how to lay blocks, how to tie iron reinforcements together. It’s called metal lathing in New York City. I learned how to pour concrete, all in just three days.”

After returning home, Suarez found opportunities to work on other construction projects. She went to the Catskills to help build a wood-fired kiln at a pottery school. As she described, “I’ve always had an interest in building things. This was all tying together, because when I was young, my dad, who is an architect, used to have a carpentry shop in the garage. I remember, at the age of five and six, being in there with him while he was building something. He would let me finish pounding the nail, or I would hold the wood together while he drove the nail.”

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch tore through Central America. Margarita Suarez volunteered to raise funds to help rebuild houses in Nicaragua. It was then that she met some of the tradeswomen who once again worked with the construction cooperative they’d set up back in 1986, to help rebuild the small town. She got to know electrician Evan Ruderman and carpenter Rebecca Lurie on this project. Suarez had her own reasons for helping out:

I actually had a selfish reason for getting involved with their fundraising project. I wanted to be one of the women to go on the building brigade... They welcomed anyone who wanted to help. There’s always a powerful exchange when women are helping each other from different countries. There’s something that each side gets from the other... We went down in February 1999. There were six of us. Only one was a professional builder, from Wales. There were three or four women from New York City and one from Boston. We were there for a month and we started the first house of that project. Eventually, there were 30 houses built, so that was really great to be the inaugural brigade to start it all off.

This experience had a profound impact on her. As she recalled, “I had kind of been taking life as it comes. Then, at that point, I was realizing that I’d had this incredible experience