

WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

Call for more women in car repair industry

Margaret Thompson knows well the feeling of being the only woman in a room crowded with 100 men.

She faces this situation regularly at the Motor Trades Association bi-monthly meetings where she is the sole female.

"I've been very well accepted, but there are no other women," she said.

"I would like to see more women involved in the industry, not necessarily in the mechanical or body repair area, but in the administration side."

Margaret admitted her path has not been an easy one since joining the industry in 1971 when her husband Alan decided to buy a service station. The couple now operate Alan Thompson Automotive in the Sydney suburb of Kirrawee.

"Everyone is very polite and nice, but women often can't click on to the top jobs," she said.

Despite the difficulties, Margaret has still managed a remarkable career in an industry dominated by males. She has been vice president of the Service Station Association (SSA) for the past 13 years and chairperson of the SSA's training committee for 10 years.

Margaret has been a representative on the TAFE advisory committee for motor mechanics and has received the honour of being named MVRIC Motor Vehicle Industry Person of the Year.

Currently, she is serving a 14-month contract to monitor the Authorised Inspection training courses on behalf of the Automotive Training Board.

"I'm temporarily standing down as SSA vice president to take on the new role," she said.

"I have a general interest in the industry and the need to upgrade the image of motor mechanics.

"A motor mechanic is not always the job most children look for when leaving school and yet, it is interesting and a worthwhile industry.

"We believe a good mechanic or repairer of motor vehicles is as important as being a doctor."



Margaret Thompson . . . the only woman at MTA meetings.

Maureen Joseph, Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC) body repair division manager, negotiates with the power brokers who can make or break the little shop when their decisions take effect.

Big issues currently on her agenda include the Industry Commission review and recommended repairer schemes. While Joseph stresses the VACC has no bias towards those who operate as recommended repair shops, she is still concerned with the issue of ensuring insurance company customers have the right to choose.

"We are looking into those shops, who through no fault of their own, find their customer base has been eroded," she said.

Joseph joined the panel beating industry after a long involvement with employers associations and six years with the service station division.

"You have to be committed to the



Maureen Joseph, a woman of influence.

causes of the body repair industry to represent them," she said.

"It's important to give a voice to small businesses, especially as the insurance companies have all

the advantages of being a large corporation," she said.

"We represent 600 or 700 diverse small operators who are not unified and who feel that everyone around the corner is their competition."

Looking back on four years in the industry, Joseph feels she has been well received.

"The industry in general judges on merit."

Truck franchise

Madeleine Leighton took on the franchise for Pro Axle in the Sydney suburb of Smithfield against the best advice.

Colleagues jokingly said she could never operate the franchise because her husband owned the business, Pro Axle. But Madeleine was determined to manage and operate the truck wheel alignment franchise.

Certainly, she was no novice to the industry.

"I grew up in a trucking family so it was not a big culture shock," she said.

"But people are still taken aback when they find out the boss is a woman."

Madeleine said that knowing the industry made the task much easier for her, coupled with excellent staff.

Although she enjoys the industry very much she has no intention of moving on.

"A girl is the least likely candidate when going for an apprentice job," Madeleine said.

"They might interview her, but she's unlikely to get the job for reasons such as the work being too heavy for her."

And yet, Madeleine pointed to a time when her husband had female army apprentices working in his workshop. When it was suggested the work might be too heavy for the women, he was quickly told that there were no women, only the army.

Cars her passion

Young Lucina Gherzi chased her interest in cars when she went in search of an apprenticeship six years ago. She found her big chance at John Zelukovic Smash Repairs in Orange, NSW, and has been there ever since.

"Everyone was really proud and happy that I'd decided to take up vehicle painting," Lucina said.

"When I first started, the guys were a bit wary but they were still really good. No one said, 'Oh yuck, a female'."

Instead, Lucina struck her first contact with an industry that found female vehicle painters an odd combination when she went to the US last year.

"There are no women painters in the States, so they found me really strange," Lucina said.

But despite being surprised with a female painter, the Americans still recognised Lucina's talents. She came home after declining a job offer in the US.

"It seemed too far away to take up the job, you can't come home weekends," she said.

But going into unknown territory in Australia has certainly never phased her. First, entering an industry with few women and then, taking up the US trip organised by the National Auto Body Congress Expo (NACE).

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