

THE PPTTEU & RAW GTO SUPPORTING THE TRAILBLAZERS



Hazel and Jamie at the Zelda statue

The PPTEU and the plumbing industry have always been good at recruiting young men to the trade, especially when those young men have a pre-existing link to the industry. Many of us know a second or even a third generation male plumber. It is common to speak to a young guy doing an apprenticeship and discover that their father, uncle, brother, or friend was a plumber and that is why he decided to go into the trade.

But this sort of intergenerational connection is less common with young women. And that makes sense when you consider that women make up only about 2 per cent of the national plumbing workforce in Australia, so there have not been a lot of women in the industry for young people to follow into the trade. The PPTEU is determined to change that, and make sure the next generation of young women can “see what they want to be”.

There are a lot of things that determine whether someone is a good plumber or fitter, but gender is not one of them. There is absolutely no reason why women cannot make up a much greater proportion of the skilled plumbers and pipefitters of tomorrow and the PPTEU is working with its industry partners to take the steps to make that happen. And the best way to do that is to get more women into plumbing and related trades training.

About 12 months ago, the union sat down with RAW GTO (Group Training Organisation) and came up with a program to attract more women into the plumbing trades and, importantly, support them throughout their apprenticeship journey.

Plumbing is, historically, a very male dominated industry. To attract women into the industry, it is vitally important to ensure that women can work and learn in a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment. Often, it is the informal connections between apprentices and those with experience in the trade, that

make the difference in terms of providing support, encouragement, and a level of safety from anyone seeking to give the female apprentices a hard time on site. Just as a young male apprentice often learns from - and is supported by their father, brother, friend and so on - so it can be for young women.

The idea RAW and the union came up with was to develop a pilot program aimed at recruiting young women into apprentice level plumbing training, working with our great EBA companies to find employers willing to take them on, and then supporting the women through a tailored RAW GTO apprentice support package. RAW are experts at supporting young apprentices through the often-challenging period of training, finding host employers, and ensuring all the arrangements are made to enable female apprentices to learn and work safely and to achieve success.

It was in the context that the PPTEU put a call out on Facebook to our members outlining the broad concept and asking them to think about any women in their lives - daughters, nieces, partners, family friends etc - who might be interested in a career in our exciting and dynamic industry.

The pilot program is proving to be a great success. There are now ten women in the joint PPTEU/RAW program currently in training at PICAC as well as gaining invaluable on-site experience with their host employer.

We recently caught up with a couple of the women currently thriving in the program – Lillie McGahy and Hazel Bursic, to talk about the program and the importance of a supportive GTO like RAW. They also discussed the value of connection (Lillie’s father and Hazel’s husband are licensed plumbers) and why they think plumbing is a great a career choice for women.



Lillie McGahy

When the idea for the women in plumbing pilot program was being discussed, someone like **Lillie McGahy** was exactly the sort of person the union leadership and RAW had in mind. A bright, enthusiastic young woman fresh out of school and looking for a long term, well-paying hands-on career and with an existing connection to the trade and the industry.

Lillie’s Dad, Andrew McGahy has been in the commercial mechanical sector, and working with A.G Coombs, for 22 years. A great EBA company, A.G Coombs agreed to be a part of the pilot program and be the host employer for Lillie. Lillie had already done a couple of weeks of work experience at the company, and so knew the people and what to expect when she started her apprenticeship.

Lillie says she is very pleased with her decision to choose plumbing as her career, and is grateful for the PPTU/RAW program:

“I love it. It is working out really well. I enjoy learning in a hands-on practical way. I like to see things and that’s how I learn best so plumbing suits me. I am really interested in the mechanical side of things, probably more than domestic sanitary type stuff, and so working at Coombs is great”.

It is great to be able to go to work with Dad and to have that in common with him. Lillie says she may have got opportunities without the program, but being part of the union led initiative helped:

“Being a part of the program and having the support of RAW GTO really helps. They do all the arrangements with the host employer, and make sure everything works. If there is a problem, I can talk to them. I feel very well supported at work and in training”.

When she’s not working or training, Lillie spends her time with show ponies – the four-legged kind. Lillie has a passion for horses, and caring for and showing her ponies is her great passion:

“I got into it about eight years ago, through a friend’s Mum who was into dressage. I spent a bit of time with her and then shortly after got my first pony and I’ve been showing horses for about five years now. I live in regional Victoria, in a place called Yarck on a beef farm, so we have room for horses. I have two at the moment, an ex-racehorse and a show pony. I love spending time with them and it’s a good change from plumbing.”



Young Lillie with her Dad



Hazel Bursic

Hazel Bursic is a second-year plumbing apprentice, having completed the first year of her training as part of another program. At 37, Hazel has more life experience than many of her fellow apprentices. A mother of two (aged 10 and 8) and with a background working in the healthcare sector, Hazel is no stranger to hard work or long hours. Hazel is a true trailblazer, opting for a career change that brings the opportunity to learn really valuable skills and the chance to have a high wage and secure future. And she is loving it:

"I love being hands-on, and I love being on site. I have found that all the guys I work with are really respectful – and that is important given I am the only woman on site".

Hazel's connection to the industry is through her husband, PPTEU Delegate Jamie Bursic. Jamie, a licensed Mechanical Plumber works with Ellis, and saw the Facebook ad about the women in plumbing program and thought I would be a good candidate – and here we are!

"The program is great. I get to learn with other women, which is nice, and helps to build connections. Those connections are really important, because they will really help the next generation of women coming through if there is a strong group of women already doing it. I am really proud to be part of this program and think RAW and the union are doing a great thing here."

Hazel's host employer is All Staff Fredon, a long term EBA company. Hazel is currently working on the Kane Constructions St Vincent's project. Hazel says she is enjoying the challenge and building connections within the industry and with her city:

"I think it's amazing that I am able to work as a woman in a career that was once very male dominated, now you can find women striving to do just as the men do and show that we are just as capable. By the end of my apprenticeship, I will be proud to show my children the jobs all around the city I have helped build, just like my husband has shown them over the many years he's been working."

Asked what advice she has for any young women thinking about a career in the plumbing and fire protection industry, Hazel is very positive:

"I would say to girls out there thinking about giving plumbing go, is that yes, it is challenging but also very rewarding at the same time. The friends you'll make along the way make it so worth it and the support offered by not only my employer (Raw/PPTEU Women), but also the guys on site, who only want to teach you the best ways of the trade, help you tremendously through your apprenticeship journey".

THE PPTEU and RAW GTO are now taking expressions of interest for a new intake of female apprentices for 2024. All expressions of interest should be sent through to the PPTEU. Please contact your local Organiser, or email Russell Menzies at Russell@ceputec.edu.au