

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Leisa Williams-Swedberg, Women in Skilled Trades – Michigan

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

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The Fix-WIST

00:00:03 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Welcome to The Fix. It's like Groundhog Day for trades. Where we see card is in. We're good. Inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at OATEY with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of OATEY's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community. A community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

00:00:43 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Well, Doug, we have another amazing guest with us today, and I am so excited to have the opportunity to learn about all of this past experience, as well as the work that they

00:00:54 **Doug Buchan**

doing with the state up north. Yes, yes, the state that we don't mention often around here in Ohio. But we play nice. Yes, we do. All right, Katherine, so tell me what you think here. What is today's guest one half of a percent, one in 10,000, and natural oysters all have in common? I don't know. They all create one half of a percent of the world's oyster pearls that are put into jewelry. Today's guest is definitely one of those pearls that we have found.

00:01:30 **Katherine Lehtinen**

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

I love it, Doug. Always come with the fun fact where I at one moment always go, where is he going? But I love it. That's right. Today, we have Lisa Williams Settleberg, who is here with us from Women in Skilled Trades, Michigan. Or also, WIST. WIST. Yes, which that'll be a lot easier to say than that whole whole sentence of everything. So wonderful. Well, can you take us through and share your journey into the trades and what inspired you to pursue a career in construction management?

00:02:03 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

Well, that's a really big question. Very big. I guess I it's interesting when we interview our women for women and skilled trades or One of the things that is a repeating comment is I want to do something with my hands. And I want to see what it is that I'm going to create and have it be there for a lasting period of time. I was that little girl. So I loved having tools around and making things and as I got older and tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, construction was not the first option that I had. it was retail management. And it wasn't until I had a brother that gave me an opportunity to go back to college and I did and my career path became construction management. So I've been a project manager for capital construction at a university in Michigan for about 24 years, varying different capacities from being the project manager to construction administrator, overseeing all of the capital project on our campus, and then doing a lot of data and analytics and then digging

00:03:16 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

a little bit more into how do we take cloud -based programs and allow our construction groups to not have to walk around with rolls and rolls of drawings and prints and specifications. So worked on that and very involved in service level agreements for preventative maintenance at our university. So construction is something I love and my brother was a equipment operator. He installed natural gas pipeline across the country and I just had, you know, an avid a respect for what he did. But when you just go past construction sites, this is like poetry in motion. And for sure, trades are such an important part of our world. And as I grew in my role at the university, I was introduced to another project manager from a local construction firms. So, think back 24 years ago, there weren't many women represented anywhere on a construction site. So, as a project manager, knowing that

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

there's this other woman from a contractor that is on my project at the university, I was just drawn to her and that

00:04:29 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

was Tori Minold. And Tori was really the spearhead in creating Women in Skilled Trades. So, she nor Carol Kuhl, who who is another individual that I came across via Tori because as construction administrator, I was looking for another project manager and was hoping to find a woman. And she told me about Carol. Carol interviewed, she came into the fold and that's how the three of us met and created this really long friendship. And it was in 2016 that we had an election and Tori was just taken by the fact that she needed to do something to inspire women and provide them with a living wage. And she didn't know what that was going to be. So she and Carol went out and had beers. I love it. And they said, yeah, do you want to get involved in this? And that was in November. And I said, I can't, I can't until January. I've got these other fires that I'm working on and I have to pay attention to that. In the meantime, though, Carol and Tori just took this by the reins and started talking to individuals.

00:05:40 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

You know, this was a grassroots idea. We didn't know if we were going to be able to do anything with this or not. But we were told, find this woman at the Resource Center in Greater Lansing, and she is a huge resource for you. And she'll be able to tap you into a lot of different individuals that have a lot of experience and apprenticeships. Lo and behold, we were introduced to the woman that represents apprenticeships for Associated General Contractors. We got in touch with this gentleman that represented apprenticeships for the Department of Labor. We then fell in line with another gentleman that worked at Michigan, still works at Michigan Works, and he represents apprenticeships. So, it was this uncanny alignment of people at the perfect time. It was amazing. So, am I still answering your question because I could continue on? No, absolutely.

00:06:38 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

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You're telling us the journey and that's exactly what I asked because I was going to go into it. How did this all happen between Carol and I was going to say over a couple glasses of wine but a couple glasses of beers. I like it.

00:06:47 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

A couple of glasses of beer and many more after that. So we had this group that we called our stakeholders and we were trying to determine now what? Sure. We want to do this, but now what? What do we do? So we started investigating options and different programs and that's why I'm saying I believe Western Virginia Women Work along with, I believe it's Chicago Women Build. Yes. These were all programs that we were looking at to try to understand how we could model something like it. And however, Carol came across NABTU, North American Building Trades Union, and the MC3 program, which is a multi-curriculum course for a pre-apprenticeship training. And we kind of, you know, we brought that into the stakeholder group. We talked about it, we like the look and feel of it. So we sent Carol off to become Train the Trainer. And she came back and we looked at this program, originally I believe it was 14 weeks, maybe 12 or 14 weeks, because we wanted to provide this to women who we knew were

00:08:04 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

most likely in a current job doing something. Right. And we thought, you know, how could we make it available to them? And we settled on Tuesday nights and Thursday nights from six to nine and Saturdays from eight to two. So that was what we thought that would work. Most working women could probably accommodate two nights a week, even if they had kids. So, we then looked at this program which NABTU is acknowledged as a certified, they acknowledge this MC3 program in North America by all unionized trades. So if our women go through the program and they receive this certificate, it's recognized by our local trades that they have had some type of pre-apprenticeship training. And we like the idea of that too. They could take that anywhere in the United States, they could get their pre-apprenticeship with us and if they moved to Alaska, they would still have that opportunity to display that certificate. So we went down the path of how do we set the curriculum up, who's going to teach, what's

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

00:09:17 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

the venue, how do we get product and materials and the university I work at was really, really supportive of our program and allowed us to use their conference rooms, the technology in the conference rooms after hours, six to nine. They also allowed us to reproduce some of the materials that we needed and when we launched the program, I want to say there were four people from the university that were assisting and teaching, along with all of our state majority of our stakeholders, I'll say. And you know, all for free, this is volunteer. And how are you going to get through the program if you don't have volunteers? So we launched our first cohort in, I believe, and I probably should have gone back and looked, but I believe it was spring of 20, fall of 2017, I think it might have been.

00:10:21 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

Okay, and how many were in that cohort?

00:10:26 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

Six. Okay. We had six.

00:10:32 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

Prior to us having the cohort start and begin, we did a build day. So we got together with a local community college that offers technical training and a few of these different trends like HVAC, plumbing, and our IBEW training facility happens, the apprenticeship training facility happens to be in this community college. So we had a day that we were able to secure a facility, a conference room at that community college. We had a woman, Adrienne Bennett, who is like the most incredible woman, master plumber in the world. A black woman that I believe is at retirement age now, but she got into the trades back in the Jimmy Carter era. And a person approached her and said, all right, would you like to make \$50,000 a year? And she said, is it legal? And I said, yes. So she started in the plumbing industry as an apprentice back in the... before you had PVC pipe. So she went on to become a master plumber. Then she became a plumbing inspector for the state of Michigan, and she was our keynote

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

00:11:48 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

speaker on that very first... Wow build day that we had and inspired so many of the women that were there and me even, you know It's like dang. I wish I would have gone into the trades, but Out of that build day came our very first now journey woman I want to be called journeymen, so That was really a recruiting tool for us. We didn't really know how else to put our name out in the community So we used that as the recruiting tool. So that was in the summer of 2017. So this had to be our first, it had to be fall or spring, fall of 17 or spring of 18, that we had our very first cohort and it probably was messy and it probably not as organized as we wanted it to be, but we learned a lot. And we learned that it couldn't be a 14 week program, it had to be 16 weeks and we wanted to do 40 hours of math and we wanted to and we eventually went away from a 10 -hour OSHA certification to 30 -hour. So we worked that into our program and wanted to understand what things can we incorporate into this

00:13:01 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

program that will give our women a leg up when they're sitting there at the interview table. And you know, we also provide AED first aid and what's the other one, I always forget at the third part, first aid. My fault.

00:13:19 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

Oh, I don't know. Safe. Well, oh, sure. Did you CPR? Oh, okay. Got it. Got it. Got it. Yeah. Yes. Yes.

00:13:25 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

Yeah.

00:13:30 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

So it was clunky and, you know, we, at the end, we went, how can we make it better? We actually did a lessons learned with the women like a plus Delta. Like, what did you like about this program? What didn't you? and how can we improve it? And one of the things that we really landed on was hands -on training. So our program now

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

incorporates at least five of the Saturdays at training facilities, apprenticeship training facilities within our community. I'll say community. If you say 90 miles as a community, then we're willing to drive. But it gives the women the opportunity to go to the operator's training facility and actually sit in a piece of equipment and understand what it would be like to be an operator. We go to bricklayers, we go to plumber and pipe fitter, millwright, carpenters, laborers. We're going to be going back to the IBEW. So we do as much as we can to put those women in situations that they could feel like what a tradesperson would be. And they have loved those weekends.

00:14:39 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Do they, through that process, do you also help narrow down for them kind of where their skill sets lie and what type of trade they might want to go into?

00:14:50 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

Don't. Okay. We don't sit down and counsel with them. What we say is which one were you drawn to? Sure. Because majority of the women that come in and I'm going to be a carpenter, I'm going to be an electrician and that's or an operator. So we want to show them what is it like to be a painter? in the painter's union. What would it be like to be a bricklayer? So we want to expose them. And then we also have them do a hands on we incorporated that probably five years ago, where we find some, some need in the community, and we'll make, you know, free library book houses or benches for a schoolyard, or something that not only does which give back to the community, but the women have the opportunity to use the tools. Yeah, no, that makes a lot and learn what safety is like.

00:15:42 **Katherine Lehtinen**

So what was, I mean, outside of having two of your friends that you've known for a long time and were in the trades and in the construction industry, what was it that said, I wanna be a part of this movement and I really believe that we have an opportunity to help the women of Michigan?

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

00:16:01 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

I wish I had a really good answer for you, but when Carol and Tori brought it up, it was like, dang, yeah, we need to do that. And Tori and Carol and I are all project managers. We all worked, well, Tori worked for a constructor, Carol worked for a constructor, and she also worked for owners, so the higher ed. And we knew we never saw women on the construction site. And we know that women are detailed. And we know, like, do you want to wash the dishes and then wash the dishes again? Or do you want to mow the lawn and mow the lawn again? I hate rework. work. So if you can get a woman into the trades that has that mentality, you're going to save the contractor money and time. They're going to become experts at their trade and people are going to want them. So it just felt right. And we had this such an inspiring stakeholder team that there was such a depth of knowledge and reach and resources that even though we where our first dime was going to come from, we kept going down the path and

00:17:12 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

really that first year, the university that I'm with really supported the effort in order for us to get that first cohort launched. And now we're on cohort 11 in Lansing. We have been teaching that MC3 program since the beginning and about two years ago, we were approached by Workforce Development Institute in Michigan, who has a program that they run under the MC3 curriculum called Access for All, but it's not our demographic. Ours is women, strictly women, and only women, and they didn't have representation for Access for All within the Lansing area at that time, and they said, would you be interested in dissolving your nonprofit and becoming a program under us. WDI is under the umbrella of AFL -CIO and there's a lot of funding available, which allowed us to expand our program. And now we have our third cohort in Detroit, our first cohort in Grand Rapids and our second cohort in Flint. Wow. Yeah. And, you know, we got through that first year and we're having a graduation, damn it. Oh,

00:18:33 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

sorry.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

00:18:34 **Katherine Lehtinen**

That's okay. No, you could, that's exactly what we want to hear. You're excited about it. I love it.

00:18:40 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

We are kind of celebrate these women who may not have graduated from high school and had gotten a GED that, you know, didn't have family there to support them. And after this, well, the first cohort, 14 weeks, these women bonded and they were a little family of their own. And shoot, during one of the classes, we're going through goal setting and talking about what have you done last year, what have you done this year, and what would you like to change in your personal life? And this one girl said, I just like to have a friend and it broke my heart. And at the end of that 14 weeks, she had five other friends.

00:19:20 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Sandra Gillis Yeah, that's great.

00:19:21 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

never would have cultivated anywhere else. So we have the graduation, I'm typically the MC for the Lansing cohorts, and I do not cry on a construction site, there's not one tear that I'm going to shed for you at a construction project. But if I have a woman up there that we have the ability to change their life and their trajectory and their ability to sustain and become a part of the community, not only financially with financial freedom but a home and happiness and less stress. It's the most amazing feeling in the world. Yeah. It is absolutely incredible. That's

00:20:02 **Doug Buchan**

awesome. Got the passion level in here. Let me tell you, I love this. Lisa, I have a question. No, go ahead. I don't want to cut you off. Go ahead. I was gonna

00:20:13 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

say, I told you about that first journeyman that we've had that came through our program, and it takes a while, right, four years, five years. So she was right on the four -year mark, and she went into carpentry. She came to us aging out of a youth home, she didn't have a driver's license, she wasn't registered to vote, she didn't even know where she was going to live when she was 20, and she had to go somewhere. So Tori took her in, and provided her the opportunity to get behind the wheel and learn how to drive, took her to the Secretary of State, she got a driver's license, and now those two are like mother and daughter. That's amazing. It, you know, again, that's something Tori never had envisioned in her life. She's got two boys. Sure. Her husband didn't know that this girl would ever be a part of her life. But she went on to become our first journeyman and she has, Raquel, has supported our program and probably will for life. So now we have two carpenters, one does flooring. You may

00:21:26 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

have, you're from Ohio, you wouldn't have heard it. She actually did a political ad, which we never thought we'd have our women I'm listening to the radio at work and I went, is that Miriam? And it was. So we have two carpenters. We just had an operator turn journeyman this summer and we're going to have two more this fall. We have a bridge carpenter and she's going to journey out this year too. So, now we're starting to see the women coming out of the apprenticeship and becoming journeymen. And I'm seeing them on my campus. I have four of our WIST graduates on our campus working on projects, an electrician, a carpenter, a laborer, and an operator.

00:22:19 **Doug Buchan**

So cool. Wow, that is cool.

00:22:21 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

It is. And then when we go to the operators to do our hands -on training, we first went there and had an incredible woman, Crystal Schnell, just amazing, very fierce woman, who's an operator for she's, I think, going

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

into her 15th year now. So she was there to support us and, you know, brought in some people to help with that day. And now our WIST grads are hosting our WIST cohorts.

00:22:50 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Very cool. Yeah, full circle. I love it.

00:22:53 **Doug Buchan**

Lisa, I have a question for you. So your organization, I mean, the more you speak, Oh my God, I just can't believe how awesome you are. My question is, do you have contractors seeking you out saying, hey, when you have graduates, we want to hire them. We want to help mentor them. What's your relationship like in that area?

00:23:14 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

Where we're working on that, it's funny. I just flew back from this conference out in Missouri and there's a contractor there that does work in Michigan and actually has worked on our campus. And I said, look, do you self-perform?

00:23:34 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

Because if you do, I have a pipeline for you. So we're going to start up a conversation to see where that can go. And then there's another contractor that I'm working with in the Detroit area that has expressed an interest because they also do self-perform work to look at us as a pipeline. So that I think is our next step. But what we've accomplished to date is this last cohort that we had, three of our women wanted to go into carpentry. And as they were having their interviews, one of the interviewees went, these women are from West. They're in.

00:24:14 **Doug Buchan**

Wow.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

00:24:14 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

Love it.

00:24:16 **Doug Buchan**

Wow. That's pretty awesome.

00:24:17 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

So what we have created is our reputation for women who have received as much training as they possibly can, up until the point that they get into an apprenticeship program. But these are women that, it's not just butts in seats, that's why we don't want our cohorts to be 25 large, six to 10 is a sweet spot for us, 12 is a little bit too much, because we want those women to just blend and become tight and have that mentorship once they leave the program. So, I think I got off track. No, you're fine.

00:25:01 **Katherine Lehtinen**

And I would imagine, too, that them having that six weeks together would, or not six weeks together, I'm sorry, the whole, yeah, whole 16 weeks together, goodness gracious, we're all thrown off, would also prove that they're pretty committed to being in this type of field first, just going right into an apprentice program without having some of that experience. So, it shows that there's already an interest there for them. And I would imagine, and especially with your group's reputation, that it makes a lot of sense

00:25:30 **Doug Buchan**

for someone to contract. Absolutely, I'll take them. Yeah. And the other thing that I always find is, you know, and Lisa, I'm going to ask you a question at the end of this statement, is, you know, women, women are, you know, hesitant to join into the trades because it's been so male dominated for so long. But when they see like individuals, it helps them become more comfortable, helps them become more confident. So my question to you is, what does WISC say to those women that are out there and they're going to listen to this, they're going

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

to read about your thing, they're going to see it on social media? What's the statement you make to them to help them make that decision to

00:26:15 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

jump in and go forward? Promoting better lives for women through skilled trades.

00:26:19 [Doug Buchan](#)

There you go.

00:26:21 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

Love it. Simple statement. That's our mission statement.

00:26:24 [Doug Buchan](#)

Great. I love it.

00:26:26 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

One of the things that we have found multiple times when we go through our interview is I never knew how to get here. I didn't know where the secret door was or the secret key or the curtain that you had to pull aside and there's your opportunity for apprenticeship. So that's what we want to break down. We want to remove that barrier that existed in some hidden fashion of how do you get into a trade? If I'm not born into a family of tradespeople, how the hell do I get there?

00:27:01 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

Yeah, and I think especially in schools, it's starting to change a little bit where they're starting to talk a little bit more about the trade option, but it has been so much talking about going to college or those that are going through and they just don't know what they want to do. And so they end up not doing college, but don't know

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

how to make that next step into just exploring like a pre -apprentice program, which I think makes so much sense. So people can really find out what they're good at and what they might really like.

00:27:30 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

It's very true. And so people are so afraid of the 40 hours of math. Oh, my God. Because our women didn't just walk out of high school. Sure. They walked out of high school 10 years ago. Sure. and when's the last time you did algebra? So that's a hurdle right there. And we navigate that by having our interviewees take our WorkKeys test. So WorkKeys is, I'll call it for lack of better words, an aptitude test that identifies your strength in math, but in other areas too. Could be English, could be human skills, But we're looking at the math part, because when we first started, we had people had, if you look at a level one to five, one being the lowest, we had some people at one and some people at five, and we couldn't bridge that gap, and it was hard for the students. So right now, we require a minimum level for our women to get into the program through WorkKeys. So, and because I don't do the math, I'm going to say it's a four. So four or better, and then you'd be accepted. We also do drug

00:28:44 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

testing, too. That's a part of real life. And we want them to understand what it is like to be a tradesperson. You know, we talked to them about the history of trades, indentured servants. Where did journeymen come from? Why is it called journeymen? The history of women in the trades. And we talked to them about attitudes and behavior, goal setting, financial literacy. Because as a tradesperson, you may be laid off. And how do I manage that, how do I get from November to April? Right, yeah, very true. And also talk to them about, you have a trade that you can use anywhere in North America. So if you don't wanna live in Michigan forever, go to Virginia, go to Utah. You've got a trade that you will always have and it can never be taken away.

00:29:41 [Leisa Williams-Swedberg](#)

So, yeah, the women are hesitant to get into the trades because I believe they really don't know how to get into them. They have no idea where that secret door and the secret key is. So that's why we have our Facebook page. That's why we post. That's why we do build days so that we can introduce us to communities. Our Our

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

governor just said our name out loud during the conference. Oh, congratulations. And we all fell off our chairs. I believe it was an IBEW conference and one of our grants was there and she videotaped it and shared it with us. But that's where we want to get to that somebody can say WIST, yeah, WIST. That's a program that put women through apprenticeship or get them prepared for apprenticeships.

00:30:38 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, I love it. Well, I just wanna say thank you for your time today. It's been wonderful to get to know you a little bit better, your journey and all the great work that WIST is doing. You know, we will definitely connect and figure out how we can continue to support your initiatives. Can't wait till we hear more people talking about WIST and that we can refer people to WIST as well.

00:31:01 **Leisa Williams-Swedberg**

So one last story. Yes, please. My husband is getting his teeth cleaned. Oh, right now? No, not right now. Oh, okay. I'm like, wow. My wife is involved in this program, it's called WIST, Women in Construction.