

THE CONSTRUCTION RESOURCE

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**VICKI L.
O'LEARY**

General
Organizer
Safety/Diversity
Ironworkers
International

**AWARD OF
EXCELLENCE
WINNER
2019**

CHAMPION OF CHANGE

Union leader propels craft workforce
growth through diversity and respect (P. 32)

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

In February 2017, Outi Hicks, a 32-year-old union carpenter apprentice and single mother of three, was bludgeoned with a metal pipe by Aaron Lopez, a part-time nonunion worker at a biomass plant construction site in Fresno, Calif. He was still hitting her when workers reached them and pulled him off. What Hicks' union colleagues didn't know was that Lopez, employed by the project scaffolding supplier, had harassed her for days. Hicks died, and Lopez was charged with first-degree murder, but he pleaded innocent by reason of insanity. With treatment since, he has been ruled competent for trial, but that may not occur in 2019, his attorney says.

"All tradeswomen were shaken to their absolute core the day that happened," says

Vicki L. O'Leary, a 30-plus-year union ironworker veteran who now is the international union's general organizer for safety and diversity. She is also a high profile advocate for women in the North American Building Trades Unions as it and the industry address challenges in boosting their workforce numbers. After Hicks' murder, union women flocked to social media to share their fear and frustration. "I realized then that every woman who has worked construction has been, at some time in her career, afraid. This fear isn't about being injured during the work itself, but for her personal safety," she says.

O'Leary and the others wondered why "there couldn't be that one guy"

who could have prevented such a tragedy.

That palpable concern led to a pilot program she conceived—Be That One Guy. With strong buy-in from Ironworkers International General President Eric Dean, the program now is being rolled out to union members. It is geared to train those on site to be "upstanders" who can deflect or change the tone of a tough situation. "We can no longer stand by because we never know when someone could flip just like this guy did on Outi Hicks," O'Leary says.

O'Leary and Dean also had heard at a conference comments by Bridget Booker, a union member from Peoria, Ill., who had worked while pregnant, hiding her condition under baggy clothes. She miscarried at 16 weeks. Similar stories and pleas for guidance from women ironworkers also reached them. Pregnancy coverage



CORE VALUES

With credibility earned as an ironworker in the field, union leader Vicki L. O'Leary fights for diversity and respect to grow construction's workforce

By Janice L. Tuchman, Debra K. Rubin and Scott Blair

PHOTO BY JESSICA SANDIGE



CHANGING THE TONE

Inspired by tragedy, O'Leary created the Be That One Guy program to teach "upstanders" how to deflect a harassment situation.

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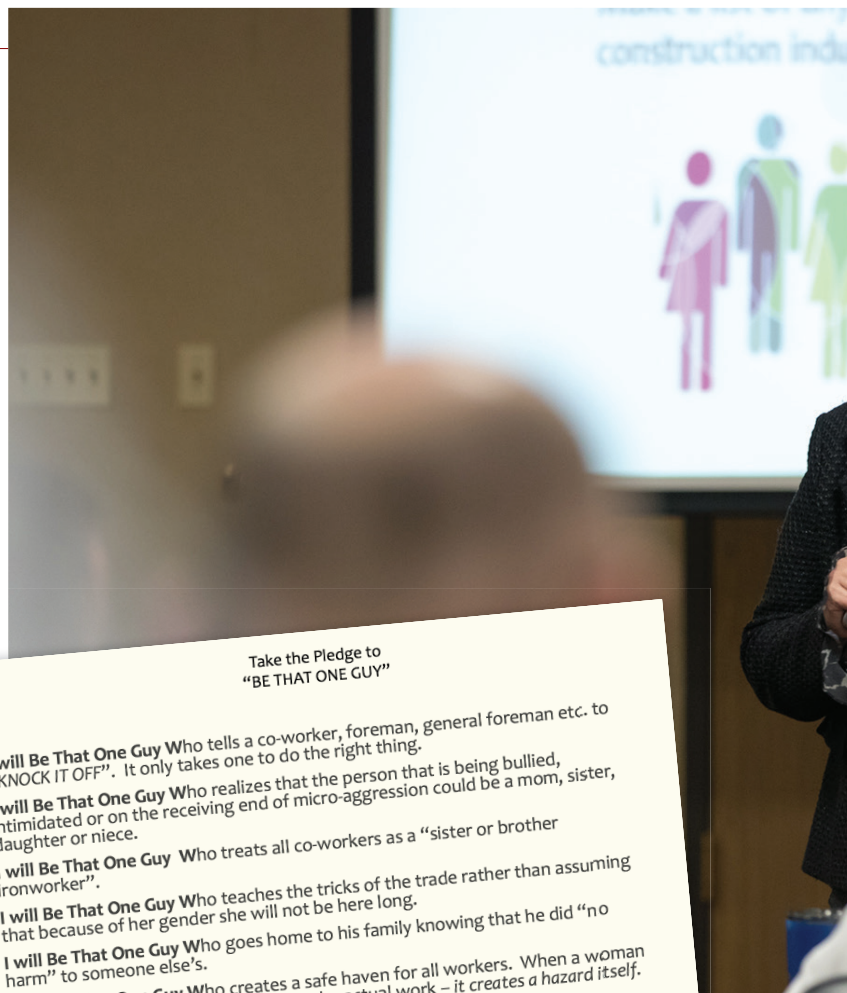
and paid post-delivery maternity leave is now a reality (see p. 37). “We wanted to make sure our members didn’t have to choose between having a family and working,” says O’Leary.

Susan Eisenberg, a former union electrician and now a Brandeis University educator who has chronicled the struggles of construction women in several books, notes O’Leary’s “ability to connect grassroots tradeswomen, union leaders and contractors, so they can all be heard and lead together.” Eisenberg is impressed by the methodical rollout of the two programs “combined with education to bring everyone forward,” and says O’Leary “leads by example, demonstrating that advancing women, advancing unions and advancing the industry are inseparable goals,” Eisenberg says.

For framing harassment as a safety issue and creating a program that works toward prevention, for her pioneering effort to provide ironworker women with a key workplace benefit to attract and retain them, and for her push to use the reach and muscle of the union movement to boost workplace quality and career potential for women at a time of critical need, the editors of ENR have chosen Vicki O’Leary as the winner of its 2019 Award of Excellence.

It didn’t take long for O’Leary and industry leadership to realize the “dangerous domino effect” that jobsite harassment—gender-based or any other—has on an entire project. The harasser is focused on the target, the victim is focused on the harasser, witnesses are uncomfortable and distracted, with fear and safety risk escalating for all.

“If you’re out there and distracted because of some of the senseless nonsense that goes on, you’re not going



Take the Pledge to
“BE THAT ONE GUY”

- I will Be That One Guy** Who tells a co-worker, foreman, general foreman etc. to “KNOCK IT OFF”. It only takes one to do the right thing.
- I will Be That One Guy** Who realizes that the person that is being bullied, intimidated or on the receiving end of micro-aggression could be a mom, sister, daughter or niece.
- I will Be That One Guy** Who treats all co-workers as a “sister or brother ironworker”.
- I will Be That One Guy** Who teaches the tricks of the trade rather than assuming that because of her gender she will not be here long.
- I will Be That One Guy** Who goes home to his family knowing that he did “no harm” to someone else’s.
- I will Be That One Guy** Who creates a safe haven for all workers. When a woman is worried about her safety other than the actual work – it creates a hazard itself.

PREVENTION O’Leary instructs union managers and talks to workers one-on-one about the Be That One Guy program, encouraging them to pledge commitment.

to be concentrating well,” says Kevin Hilton, CEO of the ironworkers’ IMPACT labor-management trust. “We should all be treated with respect. You’re going to see this thing take off not just with the ironworkers but with other trades.”

In a January session in Baltimore to educate ironworker local leaders on Be That One Guy, O’Leary gets only a few hands raised when she asks if anyone has heard of the program. But she makes her point: “This is not just about women but about the weakest link on every single job.” By session’s end, O’Leary has achieved buy-in, getting them to raise their hands and pledge: “I will



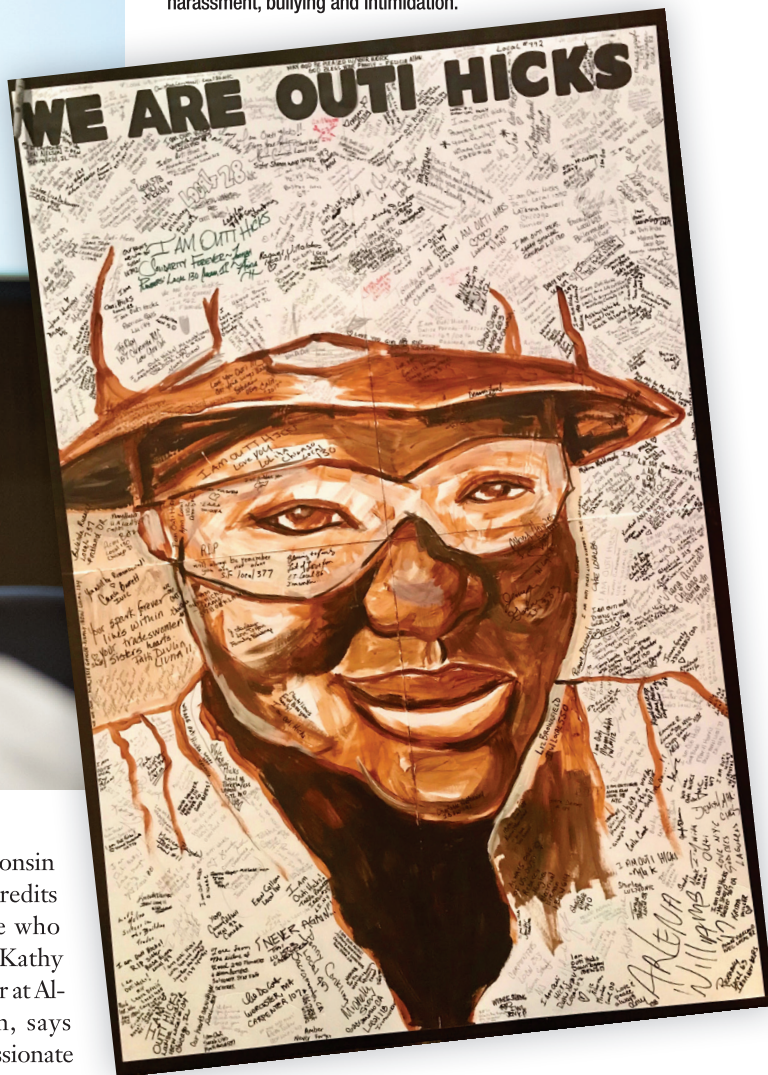
Be That One Guy who tells a co-worker, foreman, general foreman, etc. to knock it off. It only takes one to do the right thing.”

O’Leary’s push to sustain trades-

PHOTO (TOP) BY BRUCE BUCKLEY



SOLIDARITY At the national tradeswomen's conference in Chicago in 2017, hundreds of attendees signed an oversized poster of a murdered carpenter's apprentice to express their concern and support efforts to fight harassment, bullying and intimidation.



beneficiary as a Wisconsin apprentice in 2017, credits O'Leary as "the one who went to bat for us." Kathy Dobson, safety director at Alberici Construction, says O'Leary is "really passionate about what she's doing and communicates it to everyone."

Industry management also has been quick to realize her critical role in advancing women as a workforce resource for the industry and ensuring the needed return on their union and contractor training investment. The ironworkers estimates the cost of training an apprentice at \$32,000 or more—wasted if the person leaves.

Sean McGarvey, building trades president, says O'Leary's successful programs at the ironworkers' union made her a natural to lead the ex-

panded mission of the umbrella group's tradeswomen advocacy committee. "We had a pool of smart dedicated women, but Vicki stood out ... as someone who could take that committee to the next level," he says. That included executing its new diversity strategy and expanding its annual Tradeswomen Build Nations conference, which started out as a California grassroots effort in 2002, into a bigger go-to event. The 2018 gathering attracted a record 2,300 attendees to Seattle, including some with no union affiliation. William

women through focused attention on safety and needed culture change draws praise and support from women in the field. Rachelle Hershey, an early maternity program



ROOTS
(Clockwise from top left) O'Leary showed spunk early, here with brother John and cousins. O'Leary and five other women beat the odds to become ironworker journeymen in 1988. Early ironworker jobs in Chicago included high-rises. A master's degree from Gonzaga University added a credential in organizational leadership. By 2016, she was an international union leader, attending the national tradeswomen's conference. Key figures in her life include son Hayden O'Leary and her mom and dad, Mary and John Ridgley.

Brown, chairman emeritus of Ben Hur Construction and IMPACT co-chairman, says O'Leary "is in a really good place to help advance what we're trying to accomplish ... particularly perceptions by owners on how diverse we are." Associated General Contractors CEO Stephen Sandherr notes that O'Leary has added a new dimension to how "we can attract talented people into the industry."

An Ironworker Family

O'Leary's father, John Ridgley, is a retired 37-year union ironworker. O'Leary grew up in Chicago and Arkansas—following his work—and draws inspiration from her family's ironworker roots. But becoming an ironworker herself never crossed her mind until she was propelled by competition with her brother, John, also an ironworker.

While working as a legal secretary after high school, O'Leary listened to her father and brother talk iron at the dinner table. One night her father mentioned that the union had begun accepting women apprentices, and her brother said she could never do the job. Sensing a dare, she applied

and passed—beating her brother's written test score. That might have been the end of it, but O'Leary attended an orientation, and a few months later an apprenticeship coordinator called with an offer "to go to work tomorrow," she says. O'Leary's mother, Mary Ridgley, who remembers her own mother's struggle to support a family as a young widow, encouraged O'Leary. "I always told her, you have to make it in the world yourself, you can't depend on some man to make it for you."

As an apprentice in Local 1, O'Leary's training took her to many big Chicago projects. "I'm not going to pretend it was easy" being a young woman on a jobsite in 1985, "because it wasn't," O'Leary says. But early on, she met and married ironworker Tom O'Leary, who was "that one guy," sticking up for her on the jobsite, she says. Son Hayden was born in 1992, and O'Leary has treasured being a mom.

Drive To Excel

Bridge project assignments led to a city job offer to help maintain its bascule bridges. O'Leary realized that

experience in the field alone wasn't enough for a woman in a male-dominated craft. "I didn't just want to succeed, I wanted to excel," O'Leary says. Using apprentice credit, she earned a degree from the National Labor College near Washington, D.C., with a triple major in labor education, labor studies and union leadership.

O'Leary's studies sparked her vision to improve the workplace for women, says former instructor Jennifer Harrison, now a University of Maryland administrator. "She was strong and forthright about ... using personal strength to alter the status quo," the educator says. O'Leary also earned a master's in organizational leadership from Gonzaga University in a distance learning program boosted by on-campus intensives such as a stay at a monastery to learn servant leadership.

In all this time, O'Leary kept working. When a manager retired, he recommended O'Leary for his job as Chicago's environmental health and safety coordinator at the city Dept. of Transportation. "That position took me off the jobsite as an

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ironworker and put me in a position of authority over them,” she says. That’s when “I realized I could make more of a career for myself, but I could also make a difference,” she says. “I was in a good local where my gender didn’t necessarily hold me back, but I wasn’t oblivious to what it could be like on a jobsite for a woman or someone who didn’t fit the mold.” Currently, there are about 2,000 women ironworkers in North America, compared with 130,000 men.

O’Leary’s mix of academic, field and management experience impressed leaders at that union, officially the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers. She joined the management team in 2015, when Eric Dean realized the union needed a stronger advocate in the diversity role. Scott Malley, a union executive director, says “it doesn’t take long to recognize she’s worked around a lot of guys and understands what that workplace can be like.” Adds Jeff Norris, the union’s Canadian safety coordinator: “She is very approachable and very open minded.”

O’Leary has never “said no” to an opportunity to learn, and “I still don’t,” she says. After joining the international, she graduated from the National Labor Leadership Institute at Cornell University and Harvard Law School’s Trade Union Program, which prepares next-gen union leaders to face complex economic and political environments.

O’Leary returned to Harvard this year to co-present—with Bernie Evers, president of the Ironworkers District Council of New England States—highlights of the new policy initiatives. “It’s a story about how you build change in the culture of your union,” says Sharon Block, program director and former principal deputy assistant secretary for policy at the U.S. Labor Dept. “Diversity is an important piece of the

future of the labor movement.”

O’Leary is using her new perch to propel action by union leaders at national and local levels, spreading the gospel of preventing harassment and making jobsites receptive to a more diverse workforce. “You’re al-

ways met with skeptics, but it’s my job as a leader and Vicki’s to shape the narrative, so everyone understands it’s the right thing to do,” says Dean. “She’s done a great job in getting us to change the optics of how our union looks at things.” With a

MATERNITY LEAVE BENEFIT IS BORN

As her first pregnancy progressed in 2013, Adrienne Donato, an 11-year journeyman ironworker in New York City, began to stress. With no rules or role models for being pregnant on the job, she didn’t know how to inform bosses and co-workers. She feared difficulties in working with heavy equipment and losing medical coverage if laid off.

Donato was allowed to work safely in different project and union roles up to within weeks of delivery on her first and second pregnancies, until she was laid off and able to collect workers’ comp. Returning to work each time after six months, she now works on the \$2-billion George Washington Bridge overhaul, on which she is shop steward.

But concerned about inadequate and unclear policies that could leave other ironworker women vulnerable, she alerted newly-named safety and diversity chief

turned to work, becoming her local’s first black woman foreman, and now is a contractor.

Launched in 2017 through contributions to the ironworkers’ IMPACT labor-management trust, the building trades-leading maternity

benefit provides qualified pregnant ironworkers up to six months of paid leave before childbirth and up to eight weeks of leave after. “This is for safety reasons. We don’t know what the long-term effects on a fetus are if you’re welding or have your harness on,” says O’Leary, who adds that about 30 women have used the benefit so far.

No other trade has enacted union-wide maternity coverage, but some of their locals are looking at implementing it in local bargaining units. Also, Canada may add new federal pre-delivery coverage to an existing postpartum benefit that now extends up to 18 months. Meanwhile, one unit of the carpenters’ union, which left the building trades in 2006,

began offering maternity coverage last year. “Ours is minimal cost to our health fund and was a done deal when presented to trustees,” says John G. Raines, an official of the 25,000-member North Central states region. “We felt bad we hadn’t done it earlier.” ■

By Debra K. Rubin



NEW NYC ironworker Adrienne Donato (top) had employer coverage for two births before her union program began in 2017. Midwest women carpenters also gained maternity coverage.

Vicki O’Leary, urging broad changes. O’Leary says the issues Donato raised “stuck in her mind,” and after hearing of Illinois apprentice Bridget Booker’s unreported pregnancy and miscarriage, ironworkers’ leadership moved to adapt existing union off-the-job accident coverage to provide maternity leave. Booker also re-

EDUCATOR

O'Leary teaches women in the apprenticeship pipeline about new ironworker programs (top). She works with leaders from across all the building trades to promote diversity (bottom, left). The tradeswomen's committee hosts an annual conference that last year attracted 2,300 attendees. This year it will be in Minneapolis.

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breakneck schedule, O'Leary estimates that she is on an airplane every four days, on average. Now separated from her husband, she has a home base in Phoenix and an office base in a Chicago suburb.

At recent speaking events, she has tackled—often bluntly—additional challenges, such as the need for separate portable toilets so women don't have to use them with “urinals in their faces.” She told owners at a Construction Users Roundtable meeting how women on jobsites have to deal with sexually suggestive graffiti. “We carry a sharpie, and it's not necessarily for the work we are doing.” In jobsite toilets, “we see our name with some very specific task we are supposed to be good at.” If site management doesn't address the problem, crossing it out with the sharpie is at least an immediate fix, she said.

But jobsite issues for women will take more to counter, with many details still not reported or even shared due to guilt, blackballing, retribution and fear of termination. “Women have not put in the complaints and grievances at the rate men have over the years, so we don't have the data for enough government or industry response,” says Melina Harris, a Seattle carpenter and longtime tradeswoman activist.

Getting Things Done

O'Leary is not the first tradeswomen committee chief, but she takes over at a time when changing labor demographics link diversity issues more closely to project completion, workforce resilience and union survival. O'Leary focuses “on the big picture as someone who wants to get things done,” says Lindsay Amundsen, a committee member who is workforce development coordinator for Canada's building trades.

At a recent meeting, members voiced concern that jobsite harassment should be characterized as

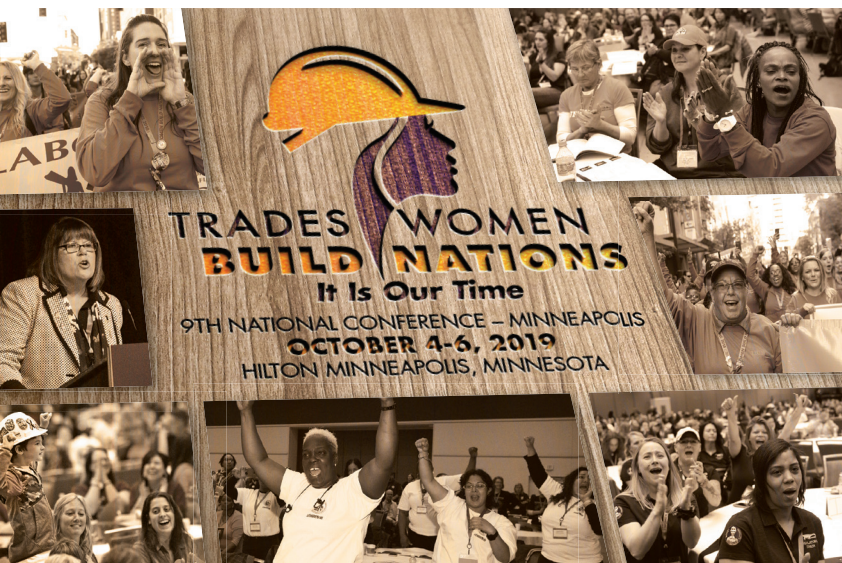


“psychological violence” to boost its visibility as a safety issue for both union managers and federal regulators, rather than just a workplace bias issue. “That OSHA won't do anything on this unless someone is injured or killed seems ridiculous to me,” O'Leary told attendees.

On her committee to-do list is working with the Center for Construction Research and Training, a building trades research group, on a Be That One Guy-style training program for all the crafts. She says the committee also continues to advocate for language that each building trades union should adopt into its constitu-

tion prohibiting “psychological violence, harassment or intimidation.”

Committee members report seeing changes in their individual unions, despite vastly different cultures. “Our board understands they have to listen to apprentices and that we can do better, but real change won't happen until women are at least 20% of trades. You need that tipping point,” says one committee member. The boilermakers' union is the first to adopt the constitutional change. The electrical workers' union and the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers union (SMART) are set to vote on similar measures this



summer. “Women are stepping out and being active in the trades, but you still have the stereotype. Culture change does not happen overnight,” says Mechelle McNew, business manager for sheet metal workers union Local 464 in Ponca City, Okla. A key to O’Leary’s effective leadership, she says, is that “Vicki tells it like it is. There’s no sugarcoating it.”

Construction participants see a strong upside in building a pipeline for women on the jobsite, noting

added skillsets in locomotive tasks and problem solving. “There are a variety of tasks on a site, and the more diversity, the more strength a contractor has,” says Tarn Goelling, the electrical workers’ union outreach representative.

To help recruit that next generation of women, the ironworkers union has joined other U.S. groups that offer pre-apprenticeship programs to teach students basic skills that lead to success. The union

holds a class specifically for women at its training center in Benicia, Calif. “We have an 85% retention rate with women who have gone through this program,” says O’Leary. Students get three weeks of hands-on training, taught primarily by experienced female ironworkers, and direct entrance into an apprenticeship when they complete it. So far, more than 100 women have graduated from Benicia, with dozens more poised to join them this month. Apprentice Desirée Crawford, in the current class, cites female instructors as a key component of its success. “Instead of thinking that I’m getting into the construction business and it’s a man’s world, I see these strong women, and I’m learning that it can be anybody’s world,” she says.

O’Leary’s advocacy also empowers others outside the building trades. Karen Dove, executive director of Seattle pre-apprentice training program ANEW, says women now make up about 20% of area construction apprentices. “We’re moving the needle, it’s incredible, but we won’t change the stigma of women in construction until we have more people like Vicki.”

Meanwhile, the impact of Outi Hicks’ murder continues to resonate. At the 2017 tradeswomen conference in Chicago, hundreds of attendees signed an oversized poster of her likeness boldly titled “We are Outi Hicks” (see p. 35). It was a moment of solidarity with the murdered carpenters’ apprentice and a vote of confidence that the group and its leader, Vicki O’Leary, are fighting for their safety, their dignity and their opportunities. At this year’s conference in Minneapolis in October, the quest for gender equity continues. ■

*With reporting by Pam Radtke
Russell and Bruce Buckley*