

"More Women, Girls Feel at Home Under the Hood"

Detroit News, Detroit, MI

July 17th, 2000 -- BY RASHEDA WILLIAMS/THE DETROIT NEWS



Clarence Tabb, Jr./ The Detroit News

Females of all ages find skills, jobs in auto mechanics. It's time to take your car in for a tuneup, but you're feeling a little apprehensive. So what do you do? You take along your husband, father or brother for extra security to that male bastion, the local service station.

"Whenever, if at all possible, I take my dad with me," said Wendi Sawchuk, 23, of Macomb Township. "If I can't, which is most of the time, I just trust the mechanic."

But things are changing in the world of car care, where more and more women are swapping blind trust for knowledge -- and where some women are even turning that knowledge into jobs as technicians.

Monique Took's says women can succeed as car technicians.

Women mechanics make strides

* In 1989, there were 880,000 automobile service and repair technicians. 6,000 of them were women.

* In 1999, there were 837,000 automobile service and repair technicians. 12,000 were women.

- Source: U.S. Department of Labor

The National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) said that women account for more than half of all customers who take their vehicles to a repair shop. To help them take control of their auto service and repair visits, ASE has put together a brochure with helpful tips.

"We wanted to help educate women on maintenance," said Nancy White, ASE's director of consumer relations. "Once women are armed with the right information, they can make the right decisions."

Sandra Kinsler created Womanmotorist.com as a resource for women who want to learn everything about the industry. The online magazine features Q&A sessions with certified mechanics, car reviews and an automotive glossary. There's also a special section dedicated to vehicle maintenance.

"(Women) hate the process because they think they're going to get ripped off," Kinsler said. "Surprisingly, men get ripped off as much as women, but that's not unusual in any business."

Bob Cotter, owner of the Allen Park Auto Care Center, said he operates his business under the best policy: honesty.

"We'll take time to explain what needs to be done," he said. "Everybody that comes in gets exactly what they came in for. I will not stand for any of my employees doing anything that's not needed."

Melanie Uzarek, 24, has no problem taking her vehicle to the Allen Park-area service station, where she is greeted by a female receptionist and licensed technician.

"They are really friendly and helpful. Even the men that work there are helpful," Uzarek said. "They don't make you feel intimidated or anything like that."

With more than an estimated 60,000 automotive-related jobs available nationwide, opportunities for women are plentiful.

"There is no better career for a woman to get into today," said Jean Hart, manager of technical training for GM

Service Operations. "It's a great opportunity to earn good money and save money by knowing how to work on your own car."

It takes more than muscle to repair one of today's high-powered vehicles. Strong diagnostic and analytical skills are required.

Ron Morast of Detroit said women are sometimes more assertive than men when it comes to repairing a vehicle. "A lady rebuilt my carburetor," said Morast, a shipping and receiving vehicle driver. "I don't see anything wrong with a lady working on a car. A woman can do just about anything a man can do, sometimes even better."

Self-confidence and drive

Monique Took, a 24-year-old certified technician at Taylor Chevrolet, encourages young women to consider careers in the industry.

"You have to have self-confidence and you have to sacrifice," said Took, who recently graduated from the General Motors Automotive Service Education Program, which trains students for careers with the company while they earn an associate's degree.

"You have to be aggressive and ambitious."

Took is the only female technician at the dealership. She said customers are amazed to see her under the hood.

"I've had people peep in the door and ask, 'Is that a woman working on a car?'" she said. "They think it's great. I haven't had any encounters where I've been criticized."

Working on barriers

Although an ASE report shows that the number of female auto technicians has increased over the past 12 years, some women find it hard to break down gender barriers in the workplace.

"You are going to be up against extra challenges," said Susan Christophersen, manager of service training for AC Delco. "Some people encouraged me a lot, other people asked 'Why are you doing that?' It's a nontraditional field (for women)."

Girl Scouts across the country are breaking tradition by sporting the Car Care Badge. Through the organization's Car Sense Interest Project, scouts learn the fundamentals of vehicle maintenance.

Girls in grades three through six team up with professionals who show them how to check fluids and oils, change tires and perform safety inspections.

"They really enjoy it and a lot of them are interested in how engines work," said Kristin Knudson Harris, spokeswoman for the Michigan Metro Girl Scouts Council. "Every 16 year old wants a new car and here they learn how to take care of it."

For information about the General Motors Automotive Service Educational Program, call (800) 828-6860 or visit the Web site at <http://www.gmstc.com/>

Tips for female car owners

The National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence offers these tips to women:

- Ask friends and associates for recommendations.
- Read your owner's manual and follow the recommended maintenance schedule.
- Be prepared to describe the symptoms and supply a written list of recent problems.
- Ask as many questions as you need.
- Before you leave, be sure you understand all shop policies regarding labor rates, guarantees and methods of payment.