

**TIA VONIL**  
**Testimony before the**  
**Subcommittee on Green Jobs and the New**  
**Economy**  
**of the United States Senate Committee on**  
**Environment and Public Works**  
**Field Hearing Entitled**  
**“An Efficient Way to Grow Jobs: Energy**  
**Upgrades that Save Families and Businesses**  
**Money, Reduce Pollution and Create Good**  
**Jobs.”**  
**Portland, Oregon**

**September 4, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your invitation to participate in today’s field hearing. My name is Tia Vonil and I am a second year electrical apprentice and Local 48 union member. I have greatly benefited from participation in the incredible non profit organization Oregon Tradeswomen Inc, as well as the opportunity to work on the federally funded Edith Green – Wendell Wyatt Federal Building Modernization Project - now one of the greenest buildings in the country.

Before I began a career in the trades, I attended an elite university as a NCAA athlete, joined the U.S. Navy via the United States Naval Academy, and traveled the world. Soon after I began college, I realized that the “traditional” path of university education was not for me - I desired a more independent, hands on education where I could achieve tangible, practical results rather than a theoretical degree in a major that would leave me few post-graduate job options and a mountain of debt. I also had trouble accepting a life in the Navy, back during the dark ages of DADT, where my country wanted me to live a contradiction, asking me to adhere to a strict code of honor while simultaneously asking me to lie about who I truly was. After living abroad for nearly ten years, I returned to the United States with the dream of a career in the electrical field. When I tried to access the path to being an electrician in France, I encountered systematic blockades, a convoluted, insular organization, and regular discrimination based on my gender, which made all attempts to enter the electrical field nearly impossible. In comparison, after returning to the U.S., when I went to my local electrician’s union, the application process was fair, transparent, equal, based on merit, and straightforward. I was excited to begin the interview and testing, but, being brand new to everything, knew little about the intricacies of the electrical trade.

Walking in my neighborhood in northeast Portland, I serendipitously stumbled upon an organization called Oregon Tradeswomen, a community-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting success for women in the trades through education, leadership, and mentorship. I signed up for Oregon Tradeswomen’s Trades and Apprenticeship Career Class (TACC), a free, 5-week pre-apprenticeship training class that helps women prepare for a high skilled career in construction, and the rest was history. During the class, I learned skills that prepared me for a

successful apprenticeship and introduced me to green collar career opportunities. It was at OTI where I was first introduced to and captivated by green building concepts such as alternative materials, the importance of conservation and reuse, storm water management, deconstruction vs. demolition, green and solar roofing, and brownfields. Programs like OTI that benefit from federal grants are crucial to the success of women in the trades because they work against the institutionalized misogyny so deeply embedded in the construction industry (trust me I could tell you horror stories that cause you to question the century we're in), and expose women to areas of expertise that they unfortunately are not exposed to via the gendered experience of growing up in our society. The work of this organization helps diversify the construction workforce, provide alternate perspectives, and encourages green building technologies and employment opportunities. I am proud to now sit on the board of Oregon Tradeswomen Inc and work to help women excel in the trades the way they supported and helped me get to where I am today.

My experience as an apprentice has been great so far. As a member of the Local 48 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers I earn while I learn, and the training is paid for by the union. I get experiential as well as classroom education, where I can apply my knowledge in real situations. It is an exciting, dynamic, active, and rewarding job where the sites and tasks are ever changing.

The Edith Green project was a significant part of my training because it was my first project as an electrical apprentice. On the Edith Green project, I performed standard electrical tasks such as wiring and conduit installation. This project also introduced me to energy saving installations involving devices such as occupancy sensors, daylight compensation sensors, and solar panels. I now don't see why these devices shouldn't be a part of every electrical installation when possible.

As someone in the trenches, I can tell you that it is imperative that our government continues to invest in green building projects like Edith Green, which are not only ecological, sustainable, and save money in the long run, but also create good jobs and training opportunities. This project was important because it was a stellar example that, contrary to common thought, commercial buildings can be energy efficient. As an electrician, this project instilled in me an ever-present sensitivity to green electrical practices. The Edith Green Wyndall Wyatt building also put skilled tradesmen and tradeswomen who had been laid off back to work, and is reminiscent of successful public works projects in America's history that revitalized an idle workforce. I've never been on a construction site where there were so many smiling faces. It was obvious that we all took pride in such a ground breaking project. Since the Edith Green building I have been on several other green projects including two newly constructed commercial LEED buildings. I have also worked on smaller green projects including service work on solar powered highway signs in Astoria, and electrical vehicle charging stations in Clackamas.

I strongly believe in the importance of green construction and I look forward to more experience doing green electrical work. I know that the more training and experience I accumulate in this field, the more I can contribute to an increasingly energy resilient America, and an America that decreases its reliance on finite resources. It is so important that we use renewable energy, ecologically, but also because the way we use energy affects our relationships with other nations.

In a day and age where the climate is threatened by excessive consumption, and economies all over the world remain fragile, it is all the more vital to invest in green construction because it is energy efficient and job creating. There is more work to be done, and federal investments are essential to the task. Skilled tradesmen and tradeswomen across the country, like myself, are standing by, ready to build.

I want to highlight the importance of coalitions of labor, community, environment and government such as the Emerald Cities Collaborative. These coalitions help to promote construction projects that pay living wages and benefits, while supporting the environment and an equitable workforce. I would like to close by thanking U.S. Senator Merkley and this subcommittee for the opportunity to share my story. I hope that my personal testimony gave you insight into the worker's perspective on how green jobs support and enhance this new generation of the American construction industry.