

HVAC detective Mersha Kefeyalhu: Brains over Brawn

By John Rumler

Just 11 years ago, Mersha Kefeyalhu was living in Ethiopia and had never considered working in the construction industry. Today she's more than halfway through her apprenticeship training to become a journeyman HVAC technician.

Kefeyalhu moved to the U.S. in 1997, and while working as a custodian at the Portland Performing Arts Center, she became fascinated by HVAC systems, including boilers, chillers and heaters. She took pre-apprenticeship classes at the Oregon Tradeswomen Center on Northeast Alberta and then completed a three-month training program at the Portland Community College Southeast Workforce Center. In April of 2006, Kefeyalhu started working at Hunter-Davison as an apprentice HVAC technician.

Founded in 1965 in Southeast Portland, Hunter-Davison employs 80 and handles projects from under \$1,000 to those exceeding \$5 million in Oregon and Washington. With annual revenues of \$20 million, the company covers the HVAC gamut, specializing in colleges, high-tech buildings, and condominiums.

Mersha's weekly schedule consists of a combination of classroom/shop and on-the-job training under the supervision of a journeyman technician. Much of her time is spent working on a maintenance route servicing HVAC systems in office buildings in Portland and Vancouver.

She works in the cold, rain, and heat; on rooftops, scaffolding, above ceilings, and less often, in crawl spaces. She troubleshoots HVAC systems, services them, and changes filters if needed. Presently earning \$16 an hour, about 75 percent of the full-scale pay of \$22 an hour, Kefeyalhu works 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with holidays and weekends off.

Many of her customers, who are expecting a brawny man, are surprised when Mersha, who is just five feet tall, knocks at their door. While women continue blazing trails in the construction industry, the HVAC sector is still overwhelmingly male. "I've only seen one other woman HVAC technician in the last three years," says Kefeyalhu. "It would be nice if there were a few more of us."

Preventative maintenance manager Ken Lindahl says Hunter-Davison has received more commendations on Kefeyalhu than any other apprentice. "Mersha is always on time and she goes about her job quietly. She's extremely thorough, and when she's troubleshooting a system she's relentless."

HVAC technicians do not, as a rule, rely on brute strength. Patience, an analytical mind, good manual dexterity, and the ability to solve problems logically, not unlike a detective, go a lot farther than muscle.

Her favorite part of the job, is the actual problem solving. “I like to find out why something doesn’t work, to go through the sequence step-by-step and discover what is wrong, whether it is a faulty connection or an old control board that doesn’t function properly.”

As far as her career goals, Kefeyalhu wants to stay with Hunter-Davisson, to learn everything she possibly can about HVAC, and to become one of their top technicians. She attends class one evening a week at the Northwest College of Construction and hopes to complete her apprenticeship training, which is paid for by Hunter-Davvison, in the fall of 2009. “The instructors are the best,” she says. “It’s a pretty new program and it’s growing very fast.”

By the time she takes her HVAC licensing exam, she will have completed 144 to 216 related classroom hours per year and up to 10,000 on-the-job training hours.

Kefeyalhu encourages those considering a career in the building trades, especially women, to look closely at HVAC. “This job is definitely brains over brawn as a lot of the components are tiny and complex,” she says. “This is something that a woman can do just as well as a man.”