

Women taking on trades

■ Hilbrecht Fine Furniture adds four apprentices each year, and this year they're all women

By STEVE MacNAULL
The Okanagan Sunday

For the first time in 2 1/2 decades, all the first-year apprentices at Hilbrecht Fine Furniture in Kelowna are women.

"For quite a while now we've seen an increasing number of female apprentices, but it just happened that this year all four of our first-year apprentices are women," said owner Dan Hilbrecht.

"It's an indication of where the trades are going. Some women want to work with their hands and make more money, and they are also very good at the fine detail we do here on some of the furniture."

The four women apprentices have all spent years working other jobs, so they come to the program as mature student-workers, which is also an indication that women are growing dissatisfied with lower paying jobs and switching to trades.

"I've been making my own furniture — and furniture for my kids — for a long time," said first-year apprentice Dale Breen, 40.

"When my kids were little, I looked for a job in the trades, but they weren't too keen on hiring a woman with young kids. So I've worked retail and at Canada Post as a sorter."

In September, Breen landed a job at Hilbrecht in 'break out,' which means taking long boards and cutting them into shorter lengths.

She moved up to assembly preparation, machining grooves and tongues in boards, and then



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All the first-year apprentices at Hilbrecht Fine Furniture in Kelowna are women. From left are Alison Vrabel, Karen Anderson, Dale Breen and Ann Marie Scott.

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Dan Hilbrecht

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into assembly itself to put together the inside boxes for dresser drawers.

"I'm the queen of boxes right now," she said with a laugh.

"Back in January, they told

me about the apprenticeship program and I started Jan. 29."

Breen and the three other first-year women apprentices are attending classes and workshops at Okanagan College for six weeks.

As apprentices, they will attend college annually for the next four years and work full time the rest of the year at Hilbrecht to become certified as joinery journeypersons.

Joinery is the new classification for what used to be known as cabinetmaker.

"Right now at Hilbrecht I'm making \$11 an hour, which isn't a great wage, but Hilbrecht is paying for my school and tools and benefits, so it's great overall," says Breen. "When I become a journeyperson I can make \$18 to \$25 an hour."

Cabinetmakers can make furniture, but are also in high demand in the construction and renovation sectors because they

can make and install cabinets (of course), doors, trim and lots of other interior and exterior finishing work.

Hilbrecht has 55 employees and brings on four new apprentices every year, so at any one time 16 apprentices are working at the Leathead Road factory in various stages of their education and experience.

Hilbrecht started in Kelowna in 1982 as a maker of store fixtures and bank interiors.

In the run up to Expo 86 in Vancouver, it got requests to manufacture hotel furniture for Vancouver hotels upgrading for the onslaught of visitors

Now the company makes furniture exclusively for the hospitality industry and does a volume of about 2,000 hotel rooms a year.

Hilbrecht's lineup includes armoires, dressers, headboards, dining tables, coffee tables and nightstands.