

Participants in the 2013 Trade Up Women in Trades Conference gathered Saturday outside Okanagan College in Kelowna for a group photo before starting interactive, professional development workshops.



J.P. SQUIRE/The Okanagan Sunday

Women attracted to skilled trades

One in every 5 entering Okanagan College's trades programs is female

By J.P. SQUIRE
The Okanagan Sunday

KELOWNA — Good jobs. Good pay. Pride in their skills. Those are some of the many reasons for women to enter the trades.

From a provincial perspective, though, there is already a huge shortage of skilled trades people and it's only going to get worse. By 2020, the government expects one million job openings.

"Women continue to be under-represented in the skilled-trades side of the workforce," Shirley Bond, the minister responsible for jobs, tourism, skills training and labour, told The Okanagan Sunday at the start of the 2013 Trade Up Women in Trades Conference at Okanagan College in Kelowna on Saturday.

"British Columbia is facing unprecedented opportunities, so I think programs like

this are absolutely essential. I am happy to see the wonderful turnout today.

"We need to keep encouraging women, First Nations and persons with disabilities, finding ways to support them, so that we can have the workforce that we need for the future."

One of the challenges is encouraging them to move to places such as northern B.C. where the jobs are, she noted.

"We see in the Northwest Territories just this month, for example, where the unemployment rate a year ago was over 12 per cent. Today, it is half of that — just over six per cent. We're seeing an incredible number of job opportunities."

John Haller, the college's dean of trades and apprenticeship, added: "Women are going to be the job force of the future, and employers are starting to recognize that now."

Ten to 20 per cent of students entering the college's trades programs are women, he said, "and that's a huge increase from what it was several years ago when it was more like four or five per cent. We took the initiative five or six years ago and we've had some incredible success stories."

Nancy Darling, the college's program administrator for trades and apprenticeship, added there is a major skills shortage in B.C. as well as across Canada.

"That is really our main motivation for running women in trades programming. One of our ads for motor vehicle trades says zero to \$100,000 in three years. You take a six-month program, you start working and you're able to earn those dollars."

Darling thinks one reason women haven't entered the trades is a lack of role models. "We hardly ever see women in trades jobs. It's not that they're not there; they're kind of invisible."

If a woman is a plumber and working in a large building, "we don't see them working on that site when we drive by," she said.

"We may have seen the odd carpenter here and there, but we don't have role models in any of the other trades. You have to see other women doing it before you can picture yourself doing it and take that first step."

One big misconception is that the trades require brute strength, said Darling.

"There are a number of factors that have

changed that and made it more accessible to women. One is the technology aspect of many trades. Another is WorkSafe B.C. regulations. It's more leverage and being smart about it."

When numerous workers were injured, the most physically demanding jobs were modified, she said. "They no longer say 'Pick up that load of two-by-fours, haul it up to the second floor and then begin working.' A crane comes in, takes the whole load up, all the workers go up to the second floor, then do the work."

The free conference brought together more than 100 women who work in or are interested in careers in the trades.

The conference featured interactive professional development workshops, including blueprint reading, working in camps, entrepreneurship, a look at WorkSafe B.C.'s new apprenticeship portals and free training opportunities, plus electrical safety training for trades workers.

Participants also had a chance to try the college's virtual collision repair paint simulator and try virtual mig welding using the college's welding simulator.