

# APPRENTICESHIP

## Senior Program Coordinator Takes a Different Kind of Sabbatical

### Phuong Tran

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A year ago, my employer gave me an opportunity to explore opportunities in professional development that could add value to my position as Senior Apprenticeship Program Coordinator at Foothill College. I was fascinated with the structured model of the apprenticeship. This model has successfully trained a pipeline of skilled workers and kept them employed for decades. During my professional leave, I was able to arrange field visits at various construction sites and observe instructional classes at our affiliated program sponsors. To deepen my understanding of the working conditions of an apprentice, I went through a formal application process and took assessment tests for the plumbing trade, sheet metal trade and the pre-apprenticeship program for sheet metal workers. I completed the initial requirements of testing and after a long five-month wait, I was ecstatic to get assigned to work at the Silicon Valley Mechanical's (SVM) fabrication shop as a pre-apprentice by the Bay Area Sheet Metal Workers Local 104.



Phuong Tran, pictured right, stands with sheet metal journeypersons at the Silicon Valley Mechanical fabrication shop. From left to right: Will, Toan, Eleanor, Nam, Donald and Phuong (Picture courtesy of Phuong Tran)

As I entered the shop, I showed my enthusiasm to go to work and learn, even though everything seemed foreign to me. I was pleasantly surprised to see there were a couple of other women who worked in the fabrication shop. I came with zero tool experience and at first was intimidated by all of the tools required to complete my daily tasks. However, today I can confidently say I know how to use a hammer, cutting saw, sheet metal brake, roller, plate shear, spot welding machine, grinder, pin welder and an electric saw. I was fortunate to work under the leadership of a skilled craftswoman, Eleanor, who has been in the sheet metal building trade for over 34 years. I was part of a team transforming raw materials into products for customers. We worked safely and efficiently to ensure the work orders were built and delivered in a timely manner. I am thankful for the guidance and mentoring the journeypersons in the shop invested to teach me how to shape, bend, spot weld, cut, seal, wrap duct and pin-weld insulated ductwork.

The relationship between an apprentice/pre-apprentice and a journeyperson is vital to the success of an apprentice's career and to the future of unionized craftsmanship. I was grateful to Eleanor and her team for consistently providing me constructive feedback that helped me produce quality work. She recognized that physical strength was an area that I needed to improve upon, and recommended that I do some upper-body weight lifting.

The journeypersons and fellow apprentices in the shop provided me with positive reinforcement and told me that I was doing a good job, which made me feel a part of the team. This was a great experience and I realized there was potential for me to grow as a sheet metal worker. Even though my journey as a pre-apprentice ended early, I appreciate the invaluable experience that Silicon Valley Mechanical provided me. I felt I was valuable to the team and to the organization as a whole. I wish I could have stayed there longer. If I ever decide to make a career change, I will be revisiting this great opportunity in the construction industry.