

Shelley Vallée-Ewing, left, and Nathalie Brooks launched Women in HVAC/R Canada to promote careers in the trades to women and to support those already in the industry.



Supporting women in the trades, key focus of new association

By Leah Den Hartogh

The trades are getting a new association—with a twist. “[Women in HVAC/R Canada](#)” is looking for members to join their newly formed association.

They held their very first gathering back in October 2019 at the Heating, Refrigeration, and Air Conditioning Institute of Canada’s ([HRAI](#)) head office in Mississauga, Ont.

At the inaugural meeting, co-founders of the association, Shelley Vallée-Ewing, district sales manager, GTA West and Southwestern Ontario at [Vista Services](#), and Nathalie Brooks, owner of [Brooks Heating & Air](#), invited every woman they knew in the industry to the

meeting. “We jam packed the boardroom and actually needed to bring in chairs as more came in,” explained Vallée-Ewing. Around 25 people attended the inaugural event.

Since then, the association stalled out a bit due to the global pandemic. But things picked back up again after Brooks was invited to speak at an Ontario Refrigeration & Air Conditioning Contractors Association ([ORAC](#)) Women Empowering Women event.

The inaugural event connected mostly women located within the GTA, but after speaking at the ORAC event, the association went national. Brooks and Vallée-Ewing



started hearing from women across the country.

Now in 2021, they are picking up speed and looking to bring in more members. In addition, they are hoping to expand the number of events they participate in and host.

“The goal is to bring awareness and to bring more women into the trades. I think that’s always been our sort of initial goal,” said Brooks. It has expanded to include mentoring, networking, and just overall support for women.

Women behind the curtain

Vallée-Ewing and Brooks together have over 20 years of industry experience to pull from. Brooks and her husband opened Brooks Heating & Air over 12 years ago and started out of their home with only one truck. Since then, they’ve grown their company to five trucks and 12 staff. “Back when we were

working at home, I had a strange knock at my door and this red-headed woman shows up,” remembered Brooks. “Since then, we’ve been friends and have golfed together over the years. Now, we put together this crazy plan.”

Vallée-Ewing works for Vista Services, a finance company that supports independent contractors, both large and small. “I hear time and time again, how they’re not getting the talent that they’re hoping for out of the workforce and coming out of school. Nobody comes out fully baked, but there are skills that are just lacking. That happens when you’re only pulling from half the talent pool,” said Vallée-Ewing. “It’s ridiculous how whenever we attend events, we’ll be like one of three women representing the industry.”

High school level

They both noted that the high schools aren’t doing enough to attract younger people in general to a career in the trades; let alone females. “We were invited to a high school in Brampton to speak,” said Brooks. “We were there to speak to the women, but we had many boys that wanted to speak with us as well because they didn’t even know what a trade meant.”

The co-founders felt that they themselves have already broken through the glass ceiling in their careers. So, instead of one of them being the president of the association, they decided it’d be best to bring in a female contractor—“We wanted to show young girls real women,” said Brooks. This was when they started to work with Jessica Bannister. Currently a level two apprentice in the Vancouver-area, Bannister is an active social media influencer, promoting her work she does in the trades. She has become the face of the association, remarked Brooks and Vallée-Ewing. “We’re the top dogs in

the company already. We broke the glass ceiling. It’s about getting more women into the trades.”

Moving forward they are hopeful to include partnerships with schools and other industry-specific associations. This might include potential scholarships and conferences.

Both co-founders highlighted the fact that members of the association don’t have to be exclusively women. They are hopeful that it’ll include anyone who wants to play a role in supporting women in the trades. This will include making sure those already in the trades are prepared for more tradeswomen. “We need to teach our boys and our men how to handle being around women in the trades,” said Brooks.

They also hope to include support for anyone who needs it in the industry—no matter gender or sexual orientation. “Everybody plays a role in this industry,” said Vallée-Ewing—whether they are on the tools or not.

When it comes to bringing in more young people, there needs to be a slightly different approach. For the younger generation, language matters immensely. Words like “manhole” or “manpower” might not cut it anymore.

They’re almost hypersensitive to that kind of thing and they pick up on it immediately, explained Vallée-Ewing. “When you pay attention to it, you become so myopically focused on how intrinsically sexist the whole thing is.”

For now, the association is looking for sponsors and to grow their membership. They are hoping to offer student memberships in the future for those looking to enter the trades.

To learn more about the association, please visit www.womeninhvac.ca.