



TAKING ON THE LABOR SHORTAGE

THE REMODELING INDUSTRY IS STARTING A SERIES OF INITIATIVES TO COMBAT THE LACK OF SKILLED WORKERS

BY VINCENT AVIANI

Shawn Woods, president of Ashar Homes, in Independence, Mo., recently looked at his workflow schedule and knew he needed at least seven framers to accomplish the job. “I needed them right away,” he says, “but they don’t exist. It’s a major problem.”

On the other side of the country in Davis, Calif., Marty Morse explains that every single trade partner he works with is seeing a significant labor shortage, even if the job pays well and is “hammer-ready.” “The industry is going to have a big problem if things don’t change,” says the owner of Morse Custom Homes. “Finding people who are willing and able to do the work is near impossible.”

From Atlanta to Anaheim, the entire construction industry is struggling to find workers. The reasons behind this industrywide labor lapse are well documented. First, there was the Great Recession, which caused a whole generation of skilled tradesmen to leave the industry never to return. Second, younger

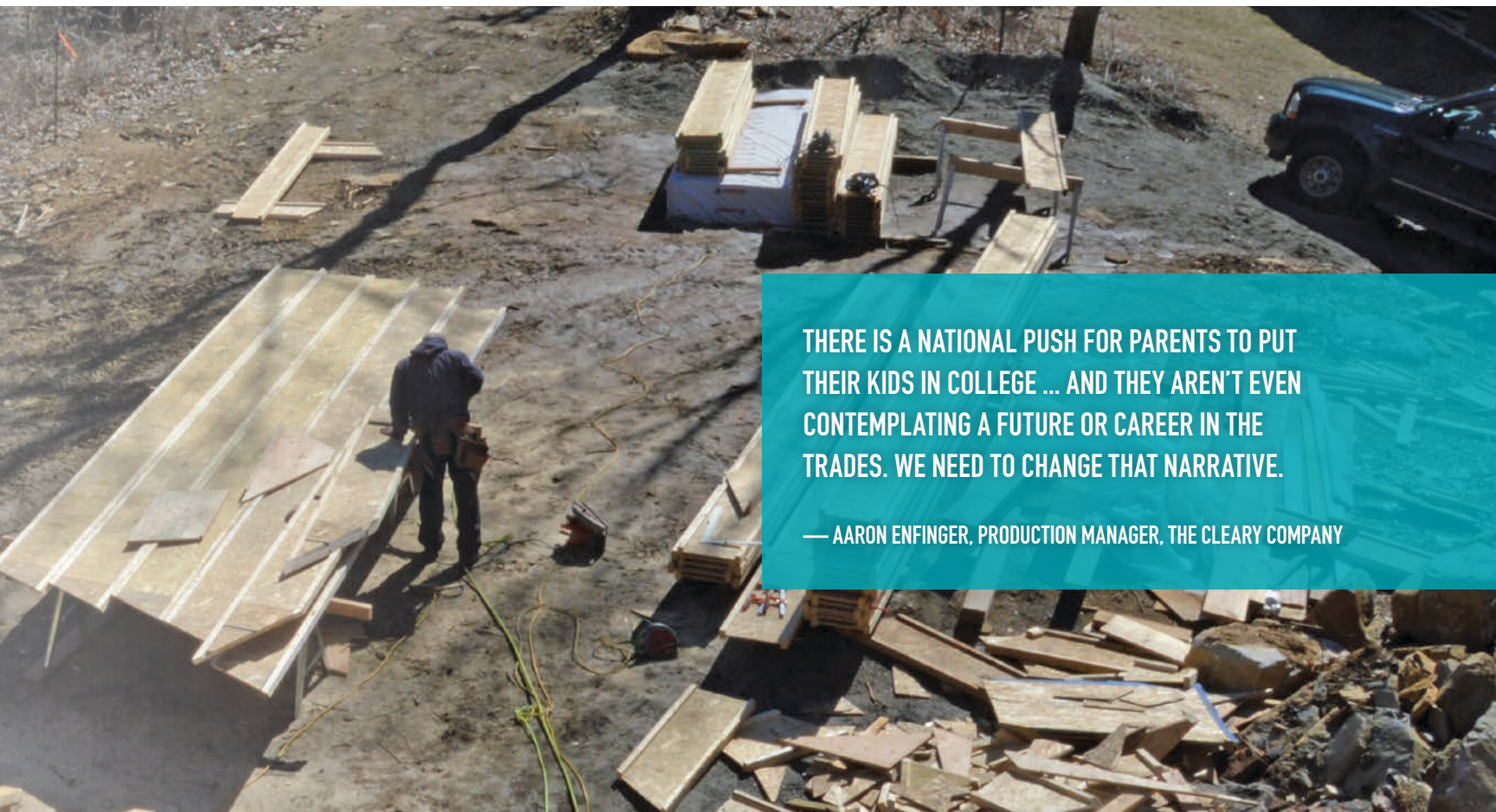
people are not pursuing careers in the trades, and the gap between the soon-to-retire industry members and the younger workers widens each year.

Indeed, from 2002 to 2013, the percentage of tradespeople over 55 years of age went from a scant 9 percent to nearly 16 percent. Moreover, the share of the construction workforce that’s under 35 years of age dropped from 44 percent to less than 35 percent in the same period, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies (JCHS) of Harvard University.

Clearly, a powerful, concerted, national effort is needed to solve the issue.

Looking at Strategies

A new and ambitious initiative was launched during a workforce summit held in March by the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). The group assembled in Chicago to look at specific strategies aimed at solving the current labor shortage. The summit had representatives from retailer The Home



THERE IS A NATIONAL PUSH FOR PARENTS TO PUT THEIR KIDS IN COLLEGE ... AND THEY AREN'T EVEN CONTEMPLATING A FUTURE OR CAREER IN THE TRADES. WE NEED TO CHANGE THAT NARRATIVE.

— AARON ENFINGER, PRODUCTION MANAGER, THE CLEARY COMPANY

Depot, supplier Ferguson, and manufacturer Kohler. The business media firms of SGC Horizon (publisher of *Professional Remodeler*) and Hanley Wood were also present, as were NARI members from Illinois, Texas, Ohio, Idaho, and Wisconsin. The two-day symposium focused on three specific areas of concern:

- How to enhance recruitment and outreach efforts to younger workers;
- How to better utilize regulatory and legislative leverage;
- How to fund any national effort to improve the labor shortage.

Reinforcing Recruitment

To reinforce outreach efforts, the team came up with a toolbox approach. The toolbox, currently being pursued by NARI, is a repository of information that's accessible to local chapters when discussing workforce issues with media, community members, and educators. The ideas in the toolbox will help chapter officials who need to

present key messages concisely and reinforce a career path in the trades.

"There is a national push for parents to put their kids in college," says Aaron Enfinger, production manager with The Cleary Company in Columbus, Ohio. "There's an overemphasis on college, and they aren't even contemplating a future or career in the trades. We need to change [that] narrative. College can be valuable, but you can get experience in other ways." Enfinger participated in the workforce summit as a representative of his NARI chapter.

The group of industry experts also recognized the need to penetrate multiple demographics with the right messaging. Women, for example, represent the smallest percentage of the skilled workers in every category known to construction. As of 2013, just 2.5 percent of workers in the construction field were women, according to JCHS.

Amy James Neel, construction manager and job developer for Oregon Tradeswomen, a nonprofit

TV STAR BUILDS UP THE TRADES, ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME

Canadian philosopher and communications sociologist Marshall McLuhan once said, “The medium is the message.” For today’s remodeling industry, Kayleen McCabe has been the ideal medium to deliver the message: “Trades for life,” to schools nationwide. A licensed contractor in Colorado and host of DIY



Hear Kayleen McCabe speak at the Women in Residential Construction conference in Scottsdale, Ariz., Sept. 28-30. For more info go to proremodeler.com

Network’s *Renovation Nation*, McCabe has made it her mission to inspire a future generation of skilled tradesmen and women.

“Many people don’t realize it, but I saw the labor shortage firsthand when I was hosting my television show,” McCabe says. “Episodes had to be cancelled because we couldn’t find a plumber. It was frustrating and it should be one of the biggest panics in the U.S.”

So McCabe makes it a point to take part in as many National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) programs as possible, and it’s why she travels to roughly 30 schools per month to deliver her real-life example of how a life in the trades can be as exciting as driving a race car. “I really feel that vocational education is underrepresented in American schools,” McCabe says, “and even worse, it’s undervalued in American culture. I

don’t have a bachelor’s degree, and I feel strongly about bringing the trades back into the public lexicon.”

For McCabe, this passion for making students aware of other career options and teaching them about the trades came about almost by accident as a result of working on the show. She says that while she enjoyed the fame that the TV show brought her, she is grateful for what she learned: “In addition to realizing how sorely women are underrepresented in the trades,” she says, “I also came face to face with how sorely the trades are underrepresented in society. I met so many people who attended four-year colleges because it’s the so-called respectable thing to do—only to later change their minds and become a contractor or electrician or plumber.”

McCabe believes that the need to get the message out about the trades is mission-critical right now. “Maintaining a high level of craftsmanship is so important to our country,” she says. “Our infrastructure is starting to collapse, people will need new homes, and we need to maintain the homes we have. So encouraging kids [and letting them know that] they can have a great-paying job right out of high school, with great growth potential, and without a load of student debt is more important now than ever.” —VA

organization devoted to bringing women into the trades, has grabbed this subject by the tail. She addressed how Oregon has helped place women on the frontlines of the war for skilled workers.

“In the last three years, the number of phone calls I receive, particularly from the residential sector, has exponentially increased,” Neel says. “Contractors are overwhelmed with work and unable to [find] skilled workers. What’s interesting about this trend is that contractors are [now] specifically seeking women,” she adds. “Women are a relatively untapped source of skilled workers and embody the tremendous added benefit of unique perspective, skill sets, and leadership. Homeowners love having women in their homes, and contractors love the detailed, thorough work tradeswomen offer. More and more, contractors are coming to me to find qualified help.”



Oregon Tradeswomen is a nonprofit organization that has helped grow the share of female trade professionals to 7 percent statewide—more than double the national average.



NARI officials visit Washington, D.C., to call attention to the plight of the skilled labor shortage in the remodeling industry. Pictured (left to right): Leo Lantz, John Price, Laurence Carolan, Angela Hubbard, David Merrick, Chris Dietz, Teresa Mueller, Charles Shade, Michael Rendon, Doug King, Steve Klitsch, Taylor Moore, Randi Hutchinson.

Gaining Regulatory and Legislative Leverage

Of course, any concerted effort to solve a national workforce shortage wouldn't be complete without engaging the power of Washington, D.C. That's why NARI recently coordinated a Fly-In and Lobby Day on Capitol Hill. The object was to assemble as many NARI representatives as possible and walk through congressional offices engaging officials and meeting with individual representatives about remodeling-related issues in general and the workforce shortage in particular. NARI has hired the Washington, D.C., law firm of Greenberg Traurig to represent it and former Senator Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) has lead the effort to increase awareness of the workforce shortage.

"The day in Washington, D.C., was excellent," Hutchinson says. "It really showed NARI members that they have a direct impact on policy. There was a very receptive audience among legislators."

According to Hutchinson, the officials in attendance included some well-known names: Senator Rob Portman (R-Ohio), Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), and Senator Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.).

"The good news is that there is growing awareness in Washington, D.C., about the need for more skilled labor in the remodeling industry," he says, adding that it's truly a bipartisan issue. Hutchinson currently serves as senior director of government law and strategy for Greenberg Traurig.

Steve Klitsch, veteran remodeling professional

from the Maryland NARI chapter, who is an educator and owner of Creative Concepts Remodeling, in Germantown, Md., also thought the trip to the capital was valuable. "The Fly-In day was an amazing experience," he says. "We arrived on Capitol Hill and were able to walk right through security, and everyone we met with treated us with respect. I think the real point was that NARI is making a presence in Washington, D.C., not just this year, but every year. And if we go back on a regular basis, we will have a voice. The congressmen were very receptive. They asked sincere and detailed questions, and really took an interest in the issues."

WOMEN ARE A RELATIVELY UNTAPPED SOURCE OF SKILLED WORKERS AND [OFFER] ... TREMENDOUS ADDED BENEFIT ... CONTRACTORS LOVE THE DETAILED, THOROUGH WORK TRADESWOMEN OFFER.

— AMY JAMES NEEL, CONSTRUCTION MANAGER AND JOB DEVELOPER, OREGON TRADESWOMEN

In addition to spending time with legislators, NARI members encountered something even more important during their trip. "In every office we visited," Klitsch says, "we met with the chiefs of staff for our representatives. We now follow up with emails and calls. As their constituents, we're remaining constantly in touch with them."

To reinforce the industry's power on Capitol Hill, Klitsch would like to see at least one NARI representative from every state during next year's trip to Washington, D.C.

Funding a National Effort

The final piece of the puzzle addressed by NARI's taskforce was how to obtain the resources for a coordinated national campaign. While full funding remains a daunting challenge, there are some options available. One of the best examples may be the National Housing Endowment (NHE) founded by the National Association of Home Builders in 1987. Its goal

HANDS-ON INVOLVEMENT TO LAUNCH A CAREER

After Aaron Enfinger departed the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) Workforce Summit this March, he returned home to Columbus, Ohio, determined to implement some of what he had heard at the meeting and immediately contacted a local school.

“I reached out to the Fort Hayes Career Center,” says Enfinger, production manager for The Cleary Company and active member of NARI’s Columbus chapter. “We really wanted to get involved and be an inspiration for students.”

Enfinger sought out the career center’s carpentry department and learned of one student in the program who was particularly eager to learn. So he offered the young carpenter, Connor Annen, an internship at The Cleary Company.

“I wasn’t one of those kids who got excited to get up and go to class,” says Annen, now a full-time intern with The Cleary Company. “My dad and I like working with our hands, and carpentry is different than anything I’ve ever done before.”

The internship started in April. But following graduation from high school, Annen decided that he would stick around for the summer to



continue his vocational education full time.

“This is the first internship we’ve offered,” Enfinger says. “But it’s gone really well. Connor is a good kid. He listens to other people and follows directions well. He’s a standout because he’s willing to learn.”

And that learning hasn’t been a one-way street. The Cleary Company has also benefited from having a young carpentry student working on its jobsites, according to Enfinger, “It’s been great,” he says. “The crew will stop and explain various processes and Connor will ask some questions. It’s been good for everyone. Connor has added real value.” —VA

is to support programs that address ongoing needs in the housing community. To date, the endowment has awarded 1,900 grants totaling \$10 million, and raised more than \$21 million in contributions and corporate sponsorships. The organization has founded the Homebuilding Education Leadership Program (HELP), which awards grants to colleges and universities to create or enhance residential construction management programs.

Adding to that, Tony Mancini, group director and principal of SGC Horizon Building Group, has created a new fundraising mechanism called The Skilled Labor Foundation. “The foundation will be handled through the NHE,” Mancini says, “and I am still forming the operating committee and developing the strategy. The goal of The Skilled Labor Foundation is to address the issue of the lack of trades and talent entering the residential construction market. The foundation will raise money from partners to be used to attract and train skilled labor.”

Mancini emphasized that while the Foundation will be part of the National Housing Endowment, it will operate as a separate entity. Affiliation with the NHE means that 98.5 percent of all funds will be spent on the foundation’s mission. A committee will be formed to make decisions on how and where the funds will be spent, Mancini says.

More Effort Is Needed

The NARI Workforce Summit was one an example of how the remodeling industry can pull together to find real solutions to workforce shortages. However, it will take more efforts before the industry will see any tangible results. In the meantime, the fight for finding the next generation of skilled workers is being waged in the trenches, and is being won incrementally, one victory at a time. **PRO**

Vincent Aviani is a California-based freelance writer who specializes in real estate and the construction market.

▲ WE’RE NOT ALONE: DUE TO THE LABOR SHORTAGE IN ENGLAND, HOME BUILDING IS TRENDING AT ROUGHLY HALF THE LEVEL REQUIRED TO MEET DEMAND, ACCORDING TO U.K. GOVERNMENT STATISTICS.