

Little Ms. Fix-It: More women taking on home do-it-yourself projects

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Suddenly ladies night has new meaning. It has nothing to do with chick flicks or girl talk. But it does have something to do with empowerment. And power tools.

At last month's "Ladies Night" at Home Depot in Bellingham, women learned how to hammer, tile, and stain — the latest moves in a Do-It-Yourself industry no longer dominated by men.

The three-hour educational evening featured over 20 interactive workshops from wood refinishing, to faux painting, to creating window boxes.

Nine-year-old Rachel-Marie Rzeznik from Milford said she wanted to attend the moment she heard about it.

"It looked like fun and we're gonna learn how to do stuff like be able to repair certain things. Maybe I'll help my mom repair our toilet or something."

Joy Rzeznik, echoed her daughter's words.

"I want to get her involved and let her know that women can do things too. She knows I already try to repair things at our house."

The Rzezniks are not alone.

According to the 2003 American Express Home Improvement Index, a national survey of heads of households planning to make home improvements this year, three out of four men are do-it-yourselfers (76 percent), but women are taking on home improvement projects as well (67 percent).

In fact, the survey reports that more women than men (29 percent vs. 18 percent) will take on the project because they "can do it better and cheaper than using a professional."

This number is sure to increase as the number of women-headed households is expected to grow.

The financial services corporation Fannie Mae, the nation's largest source of financing for home mortgages, figures that by the year 2010 the number of female-headed households will increase to 31 million — close to 28 percent of all households in the country.

Fannie Mae notes that since 1950, these households have grown four-fold. Some of the reasons include higher divorce rates and the fact that more women are waiting longer to marry.

Despite this growth, it hasn't always been easy convincing men that the "fairer sex" should get a fair shot at wielding a hammer and wrench.

Pam Bellino of Medway recalls her first home improvement project six years ago. She bought a power washer — the first step in painting her house. She filled it with gas. Then she realized she couldn't start it. She sought help from Dan Lynch at the Bellingham Home Depot.

"He told me, 'Have your neighbor start it.' I said, 'Every time you need to start your car would you want to ask your neighbor? I want to do it myself.' "

She made her point.

Bellino and Lynch, a weekly home improvement Columnist for MetroWest Daily News since 2000, became friends. Lynch mentored his female protege through crown molding and building a new deck.

Lynch, who has been with Home Depot for seven years, says women can do what men do.

"Anybody can do all minor and a lot of major home improvements if they follow the rules."

Mike Swartz, owner of Swartz True Value Hardware in Newton, says women have always come into his store, but he has noticed an increase. He encourages them to tackle projects themselves.

"As long as you have a store like us that's full-service and has knowledge and is willing to share it, you can do these things."

The knowledge is often just a mouse-click away. John Bairos, manager of Aubuchon Hardware in Hudson, says there's a "learning center" with free advice on the company's Web site (www.aubuchonhardware.com).

Sometimes the sexes work on projects together, supporting each other's strengths and visions. Dotty Fox of Holliston attended the Ladies Night on her 31st wedding anniversary.

"We did an early anniversary so I could come here. I just love to do stuff like this. We started off with a 150-year-old house 31 years ago." Fox says she and her husband have enjoyed fixing it up together.

Bob Talbot, manager of Dedham True Value Hardware, says the number of women coming into his store has increased by 15 percent since last year.

"Most of the women are coming in on their own, and they've got specific projects they're working on, mostly with paint."

Is there any limit to what a woman can do?

Dan Lynch says women and men should leave major plumbing and electrical work to the professionals, but beyond that, it's just common sense.

"As I tell all the students in my classes, if you're afraid of heights, you have no business being on a 40-foot ladder painting the peak of a house. Call somebody."

Lynch notes home improvement projects are not only fun and interesting, but also economical.

"To redo your basement, a contractor will get \$40 a square foot. So 400 square feet will cost you \$16,000 and you can do it for \$3,800. So there's the big, big difference."

Another draw is the sense of accomplishment.

Margaret Farrell of Holliston is redoing an empty apartment — from plastering to painting. Her father was a carpenter, so she absorbed a lot of knowledge.

"When I see a mess like I'm in right now and I finish and it looks good, I'm proud of it. Somebody can move in and be happy with it."