

# DREAMING BIG

## New doors open for Hard Hat graduates

Roszan Holmen  
*News staff*

After her son celebrated his third birthday, Ellen Swenson decided it was time to rejoin the workforce. Social services directed the single mother to an employment service where she learned about Hard Hats, a program designed to give skills to people on income assistance and youth at risk while filling a critical labour shortage in the trades.

Three months later, she and 15 others celebrated their graduation on Dec. 13 at Camosun College's Interurban campus.

"I thought (the program) was fantastic," said Swenson, who already has an interview for a job in her field.

As one of five female graduates, she says she's already secured a job as a traffic flagger but hopes to find a career that fits.

"I'm not physically large, and I'm a woman, so it is a little bit intimidating, but (Hard Hats) definitely makes me feel more confident."

The B.C. program offers classes around the province and provides training in electrical, plumbing and pipe fitting, carpentry and several other construction-related skills.

In Victoria, it's run by GT Hiring Solutions, in partnership with Camosun College, and graduates three classes a year, each with up to 20 students. Students also receive WHMIS, first aid and safety training.



*Roszan Holmen/News staff*

**Hard Hats student Ellen Swenson at her Dec. 13 graduation ceremony. The Hard Hats program teaches construction skills to adults on income assistance.**

They are taken on site tours and hear speakers from many industries. The idea is to get students connected with prospective employers. The result is a 90 per cent employment rate within a month of graduation. After six months, 80 per cent are still working in their field.

But more than just skills training, Hard Hats comes from a social services background, says Garth Yoneda, Hard Hats instructor and assistant manager with GT Hiring Solutions. Many students come from unstable housing situations and some are even living on the street, and need extra support.

Students are provided with meal and bus tickets to help them succeed.

"Some will still be reluctant to get a job, though we try to screen those guys out," said Yoneda.

Hard Hats receives \$6,000 in funding per student by Service Canada and the B.C. employment program but Yoneda is still looking to secure another \$40,000. While he has approached many different ministries for the funding, he says his program doesn't fit into any of their existing envelopes. "That's the way politics works," he said.

The ministry of community services used to support Hard Hats, but pulled their funding last year.

"We looked at a variety of mentoring programs and Hard Hats was one of them," said Minister Ida Chong, noting her ministry funds programs like the Minerva Foundation, the YWCA and the B.C. Construction Association.

"Some programs were finding higher success rates than others ... and the cost of (Hard Hats) was higher than others. We were also trying to focus on women because my ministry is responsible for women's issues," said Chong, noting the majority of Hard Hat graduates are men.

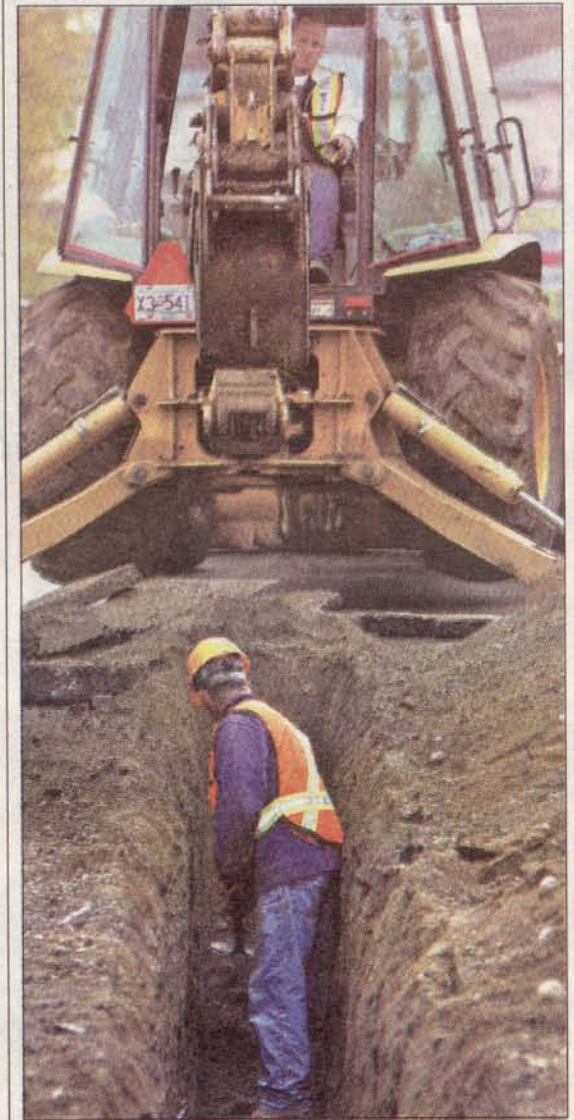
But Chong, MLA for Oak Bay-Gordon Head, says it's still a good program filling a great demand for labour.

In the last year, there were 88,000 jobs created in B.C., half of which were in construction.

In her address to the graduates, Chong said "This is where you put your toe in the water and decide you want to enter the construction and trade field, but the door is wide open... dream big."

*rolmen@saanichnews.com*

## HARD AT WORK



*Dunc Malcolm/News staff*

**Chew Excavating employees John Cavral, in the trench, and backhoe operator Kirk Smith kept busy recently excavating Ravine Way in preparation for the laying of underground hydro service to the new development at Town & Country Shopping Centre.**