

Women's Workshop Builds Confidence and Welding Skills

The Red Bench Women's Workshop Corp. is a membership-based, nonprofit welding workshop nestled in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. With more than 60 members and a fully equipped shop, it offers a space for women and gender-diverse people to learn and practice welding and metalworking skills — Fig. 1. The workshop works to instill confidence and welding skills by fostering an environment where trying is encouraged and making mistakes is met with reassurance and support.

Empowering through Confidence

Although The Red Bench offers a fun and relaxed community atmosphere where its members come together to learn and practice, it also places an emphasis on confidence and its link to shop safety.

"You can't feel confident without first feeling safe," affirmed Jolene Borrelli, co-founder and president of The Red Bench. "And without confidence, learning a new skill can feel overwhelming and inaccessible."

By imbuing members with confidence, the workshop helps build a bridge connecting women and gender-diverse people to a skill, hobby, or career they might never have imagined for themselves. Whether it be due to widespread gender disparity or intimidating workplaces, women and gender-diverse people often cannot envision themselves in a workshop welding, metalworking, or using tools and equipment. The Red Bench shows its members that they belong in such spaces and have an innate ability to be successful, confident tradespeople, whether it be at home or work.

"This is our model," asserted Mackenzi Johnston, co-founder and CEO of The Red Bench. "We offer holistic, well-supported instruction by example in a collaborative, accessible, and safe space with the goal of unlocking



Fig. 1 — Members of The Red Bench attend a workshop on welding joint types. Pictured is guest instructor Sebastian Max Ceron, director of the Canadian Welding Bureau (CWB) Group, demonstrating a lap joint with the gas metal arc welding process.

the innate potential that already exists within the person."

Equipping Fundamental Skills

Connecting its members to the skilled trades, The Red Bench offers shop orientations, welding workshops, welding nights, and open shop hours.

Shop orientations. The shop orientation introduces members to safety in the shop and teaches them how to use the tools that are fundamental to metalworking and welding. This consists of a review of the workshop's health and safety program, including emergency response plan, fire extinguisher use, and personal protective equipment (PPE). The shop orientation also covers safety while using nonpowered hand tools (e.g., bench vise, clamps, and files), powered hand tools (e.g., angle grinder), and welding machines coupled with tool demonstrations and practice time.

Welding workshops. The welding workshops take place in the evening and are designed to help members develop a particular skill, such as gas metal arc, shielded metal arc, and gas

tungsten arc welding processes as well as angle grinding techniques and more.

Welding events. The welding events are led by a guest speaker. They involve the fabrication of a small item to teach members about a particular topic (e.g., build your own keychain while learning about welding metallurgy).

Open shop hours. During open shop hours, members can use the shop drop-in style in a one-on-one setting.

Cultivating a Business

The Red Bench was established in 2020 by Borrelli and Johnston, both of whom were materials engineering students at the University of Alberta in Canada — Fig. 2. From 2020 to 2022, the two women dedicated their free time to developing the business by securing a shop space, finding industrial sponsors, applying for grants, and gathering equipment donations. With the generosity of sponsors and supporters, the workshop went from being an idea to being a fully functional workshop.

Opening its doors in 2022, The Red Bench currently shares a space with Canwe Solutions Ltd., a welding engineering firm local to Edmonton.

It is sponsored by Miller Electric Mfg. LLC and Edmonton-based ALCO Gas & Oil Production Equipment Ltd., both of which support the workshop with PPE, welding equipment, and operational funding.

With a Little Help from AWS

The Red Bench has also sought out support from the American Welding Society (AWS) by applying for the Welding Workforce Grant in the fall of 2021. To qualify, Johnston and Borrelli had to make The Red Bench an AWS Educational Institution Member.

“We weren’t sure if we qualified for the membership since we are not an orthodox educational facility,” explained Mack. “We are a pretraining and precertification space meant for women and gender-diverse people to discover and practice the skills that can propel them into formal professional and educational opportunities.”

However, the duo possess a strong ally within AWS. Thomas J. Lienert, an AWS past president who dedicates much of his efforts toward supporting and advocating for gender equity in the welding business, encouraged Johnston and Borrelli to apply for a membership. He also generously offered to take care of the financial cost of the application. It was because of Lienert’s belief in The Red Bench that the organization became an AWS Educational Institution Member, which was a huge leap forward in the establishment of the workshop. Since becoming



Fig. 2 — The Red Bench Founders (from left) Jolene Borrelli and Mackenzi Johnston don PPE that was donated by Miller Electric.

an AWS member, The Red Bench has gained the critical visibility it needs to maintain and grow the initiative.

Reaching a major milestone, at this year’s FABTECH show held November 8–10 in Atlanta, Ga., Johnston and Borrelli will be receiving the 2022 AWS International Meritorious Certificate Award, which recognizes the candidates’ significant contributions to the worldwide welding industry. In 2021, the pair also became recipients of the AWS Alberta Section District Scholarship and the AWS Jerry Hope Memorial Scholarship.

“AWS puts people first,” said Borrelli. “Being an Educational Institution Member allows us to put our own people first while carrying on AWS’s legacy.”

Forging Ahead

Looking ahead, Johnston and Borrelli plan on offering programming in a larger shop space to better serve their members. They are eager to grow the initiative through donations and volunteers.

To learn more about The Red Bench, visit theredbench.ca. You can also follow the organization on social media @theredbenchyyeg. 

This article was written by **MACKENZI JOHNSTON** and **JOLENE BORRELLI** (hi@theredbench.ca), founders of The Red Bench Women’s Workshop Corp., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Notice of Annual Meeting of the American Welding Society

The Annual Meeting of the members of the American Welding Society will be held on Monday, November 7, 2022, beginning at 8:30 a.m. at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis Hotel, Atlanta, Ga.

The regular business of the Society will be conducted, including election of officers and members of the board of directors. Any business properly brought before the membership will be considered.