

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 2: EPISODE 5: Kim Spicer, Electrician. Queens, New York

TRANSCRIPTION

ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: Mississippi John Hurt: "Pay Day."

NANCY GROCE (Host): Welcome to *America Works*, excerpts from longer interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States recorded by researchers for the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is *America Works* episode features excerpts from a longer interview with electrician and journey wire-woman Kim Spicer. Spicer is a proud member of The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW, Local #3) in Queens, New York. Kim talks about how she tried numerous other, less fulfilling jobs before apprenticing to become an electrician. And she loves it!

In this interview, she talks about her training, some of the tasks and skills involved in her work, her daily on-the-job routines, and the challenges of being a woman in a traditionally male trade.

Kim was interviewed as part of the Archie Green Fellowship project "Illuminating History: Union Electricians in New York City." This oral history project was made possible through an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center. The award enabled members of the IBEW, in collaboration with Empire State College's Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, to document the occupational biographies of some two dozen of their co-workers.

INTERVIEW

Kim Spicer: This is going to be my 10th year. I came in 2007, but I got initiated 2008.

Setare Arashloo: Do you remember your first day?

Kim Spicer: Yes, Yes, I do. They had me on, I think it was a 6-foot ladder with the huge chopping gun with the huge bit, chopping through a wall. I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to get this done!" And I blew right through that wall and that was it. He was like, "Wow, that's a big hole!"

I'm like, "You told me to do this and that's what I did." Yeah, that job was, yeah, that was a fun job.

I had so many jobs before I became an electrician because I didn't like anything that I did. I was a dental assistant before I came in. I did it, and as soon as I got into clinical rotation I knew it wasn't for me because I could not deal with working with people and listen to them complain about something that, if they had taken care of their teeth, they wouldn't have these issues. So it just drove me insane. The only thing that I liked doing was fabricating things and working with my hands and staying in the lab.

I would see these signs about "N.E.W." -- nontraditional employment for women—everywhere. So, when I called up they were like, "Yeah, come in." Came in, took the test, I got into a class. And they tried to make me become a carpenter, because I was really good. And I'm like, "I didn't come here for that. I don't want to be a carpenter. That's easy, I want to do something challenging."

Setare Arashloo: How did you learn?

Kim Spicer: Well, you know what, I was always handy. Someone posted on Facebook their first tool was --they showed a butter knife to take things out, and I'm like, "No, we had tools at my house like screwdrivers, pliers, and everything."

I did all this stuff before I got in. So I was always comfortable with tools and using tools even when I got into college I was bending my boxes, forming the metal and everything on my own. I was always comfortable. It might be something that I got from my dad, because I'm really, really handy and comfortable with certain things, except for confined spaces and, like, insects...

Like I said, I was always handy, so when I was younger, I would tell them things to do, whatever; I would try to help them-- like "I can do it." And they're like, "Oh no." And I'm like, "Okay." So the guy comes over, he puts in a deadbolt lock, you know, that turns, and he put it in the wrong way. So, he's trying to shut the door and it's not shutting. And before I could stop him— (because I saw what he was doing)--he took his foot and he kicked the door! And I was like, "No! You idiot, what are you doing?" I said, "We're stuck in here now!" "What do you mean?" I'm like, "These are the projects, this is a steel door, you just shoved another piece of metal in between it, and we can't get out." We couldn't get out.

So thank goodness, my friend was on the second floor. Called somebody up, they had to kick the door in. But before that, I convinced him to wrap a sheet around himself to lower himself down to the first floor. And I almost—like, he had his head out the window and one leg--and these guys came by, and they're like, "What are you doing?" I was like, "Damn!" I wanted him to go out that window so bad for getting us stuck in there. I was so mad! I always wanted to tie bedsheets together and go out of a window, but not personally because I know you'll die. But I was going to send this fool out there because he got us stuck in that apartment.

Setare Arashloo: Have you ever felt unsafe at a job site?

Kim Spicer: Yes. Yes, because it's electrical. So, it's either you feel unsafe depending on who you're working with; because you could have a dangerous partner. There are a lot of reckless people out there. There are a lot of old timers who do reckless things. There's a lot of young people that do reckless things. There's a lot of people that aren't healthy that do reckless things.

I had a friend once tell me how we're electricians we don't climb down off of ladders, we jump. And he jumped on a screw, and that screw had to be unscrewed out of his foot. That's reckless behavior. Not testing things. There's a certain way you carry tubing or conduit pipe. You're supposed to carry when you're walking up, so this way you don't poke somebody in the eye or hit them. A certain way. You got to watch where you're swinging. You got to know your swing radius and everything, and make sure you don't hurt anyone with your tools. The people, they just don't have any consideration for others. And that's with other trades, too. You got to watch out for everybody.

Setare Arashloo: Has your job ever felt creative to you?

Kim Spicer: Yes. Yes. Yes, especially, like, when I was in the Oculus and we had a ceiling that was, like, a geometrical thing. Like these carpenters were fantastic! But we had to get into that ceiling. I'm like, okay, now I got to bend pipe and make this work. I'm bending the pipe and I'm doing racks, but nothing is square. You're trying to measure, but it's hard to measure. But then it's like you got to go by sight. Because I was an apprentice, I learned everything has to be straight, even, level, beautiful.

A typical day is waiting forever for the elevator, which works perfectly fine. You don't need an engineer to press the button for you. We're just mostly going around, like, this building should have been done by now. So it's almost like punch list things. There's things that are missing that should have been there...

Like we were troubleshooting this wire for a day! Couldn't find it. So, of course, the foreman he finally comes around. He was like, "Try that box right there." So I climb up a 12-foot ladder, open it up--and I'm like, "Why didn't he come here yesterday and say 'Try this box,' while we're going upstairs opening up panels, trying to tug on these wires and everything?" No one has a toner. It was just madness.

Well, my current co-worker's awesome. Ines. I've been lucky in this industry so far where I've been with a lot of women. As a first year, I was with Dell Electric and I ended up on a deck job--which was another nightmare, but I learned a lot. There were two female electricians, it was Luz and Stella. We had two female fitters, two female carpenters, plumbers, surveyors. Every trade had at least two or three females. So I'm, like, I'm on a job with a bunch of women. We had bathrooms everywhere! The bathrooms situations a whole other thing.

For some reason, ever since I was a first-year apprentice, they like putting me on the “bull gang,” which is the people that pull the wire or set up these big wire pulls--like 600s, like big! But I got it done. So I guess they saw that I had some sort of strength and they kept putting me on it.

Jaime Lopez: What does it mean to be a union electrician or union member?

Kim Spicer: It's prideful because it shows that if you're a) that you went through everything. You went through that five-and-a-half year hazing of getting coffee, and deliveries and all the craziness. You just feel really accomplished. It's like a brotherhood, sisterhood.

You just start noticing things. Like you're in Whole Foods and you're like, "Wow, they did the fire alarm really well." You see everything. You notice the littlest things now.

I like to build and create things. So I get inspired. Like maybe one of these days I'm going to do something really cool! Like today, make something work. I love a challenge.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: Mississippi John Hurt: “Pay Day.”

NANCY GROCE (Host): You’ve been listening to electrician and journey wire-woman Kim Spicer of Queens, New York. She was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by fellow electrician and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers member Jaime Lopez and the artist and documentarian Setare Arashloo.

To hear the complete interview with Kim Spicer as well as hundreds of other interviews of contemporary American workers in the Library’s Occupational Folklife Project collection, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife or just search for “Occupational Folklife Project.”

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to *America Works*.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation from the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov .