

PROGRESS 2021

Welder chose her job, it didn't choose her

Khai Allam wanted to work for CME, so she joined a trade that fit

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Alberni Valley News

It's coffee break time at Canadian Maritime Engineering's leased warehouse on the Port Alberni Port Authority's waterfront. The vast space is eerily quiet as a small team of welder/fabricators gather at an indoor picnic table to have sandwiches and coffee.

For Cairam "Khai" Allam, it's an opportunity to climb out of the hull of the small boom boat she is welding. Clad in company-issued navy blue coveralls and wearing a black and red cap under her welding helmet, Allam cannot help but grin at the job she's been given.

Allam has been with CME for two months, but the journey to get here took her much longer.

Allam moved to Canada from the Philippines in 2014 and was a temporary foreign worker at a McDonald's in Calgary, Alberta. She worked in an office before she emigrated, she said—the furthest away one could be from a trades and technical job.

Allam and her husband, Jared Hicks, moved to Port Alberni in 2018 when Hicks took a job working on aircraft with Coulson Aviation. Allam found a position as manager at the Johnston Road McDonald's. Once the couple decided that Port Alberni was going to be their home, Allam began researching companies in the Alberni Valley.

"I said, I want to be working in one of the nice companies in

Port Alberni too." She wanted a different kind of career than McDonald's could provide: something that paid more and allowed her to work with her hands. She read about Canadian Maritime Engineering, and decided she wanted to work for them.

Some people decide on a career and then look for a company to work for. Allam chose her company first, then found a job she thought she could do. That job was welding.



Cairam 'Khai' Allam is a welder with CME.

"I watched a lot of YouTube videos on how cool welding is," she said. She isn't a tall person and she wondered whether she would be able to pull her weight, literally, working in metal fabricating.

"I said I will never know the answer if I never try." She was 32 years old when she applied for the fabricating/welding

program at North Island College and learned alongside students who were still in high school. "It took seven months in school without me having any experience in trades. I (was) a working student, working at night and going to school in daytime. I really pushed myself to get in."

When she finished school she found a job at Riptide Marine in Parksville as their sole female welder and commuted every day. She did not forget her goal of working at CME; every time she saw a job for a welder advertised she applied.

"I just didn't stop putting in my resume. I wrote them a letter about all the reasons why they should hire me. I said I will never



Welder/fabricator Cairam (Khai) Allam works on a shipping project at Canadian Maritime Engineering's warehouse on the port authority grounds. (PHOTO SUBMITTED)

stop; I will keep applying until I get in."

Allam shouldn't have worried. Senior management at CME had noticed her, and the next time she applied she was offered a job.

Allam is CME's first female welder. She said the atmosphere in the warehouse is one of respect among all the welding crew. Being the sole female was on her mind when she was first hired though.

"That was a worry of mine,

putting myself in a man's world," she said. "Working with the men is really easy. If they know I can do something they just let me. They're all pretty nice."

Allam said the coolest thing she's had to do in her job so far is operating an overhead crane. "Welding with flux core, too. Before, I welded with aluminum. This is different because I'm welding with steel. It's pretty cool doing overhead jobs; some of the positions are pretty hard,

We're going to make an effort to fill other roles with women. It's time.

— Simon Schofield

but whenever I finish a job it's an amazing feeling that it was really hard but I did it.

"I love this," she said. "I am really grateful to work with amazing people and a great company that cares about their people."

Allam encourages other women to consider trades training and getting a job in one of the non-traditional industries in the Alberni Valley.

This year's NIC fabricator/welder program has 14 students at the Port Alberni campus and two are female. The numbers fluctuate from year to year but not by much, according to one NIC official.

Allam may not be the only female welder at CME for long. Operations manager Simon Schofield said he is looking at hiring another female welder in the near future.

Canadian Maritime Engineering is making a concentrated effort to increase the number of female employees working at various trades within its facilities. "My plan for CME is to at least grow our female trade staff. I would like to reach at least 25 in the next few years," he said.

"To get there, it's us working with local colleges, having them do a pre-selection of people so they're a good fit for us."

While Allam came with a built-in boating background having worked for Riptide Marine for two years before joining CME, Schofield said he knows that won't always be the case.

"We're going to make an effort to fill other roles with women. It's time," he said.

Canadian Maritime Engineering has partnered with North Island College in Port Alberni to offer apprenticeships through the Welder Foundation harmonized enhanced programming that will start in the fall.

Jobs in shipbuilding range from welder/fabricators to heavy-duty mechanics, marine technicians, cabinet makers, shipwright and millwright to electricians, pipe fitters, machinists and docking crew members. Canadian Maritime Engineering has 92 employees, a number that more than doubled in the past two and a half years.

"This is an old industrial site, it's been here forever...it's time we make those changes."

If Schofield could send a message to any woman considering a job in a non-traditional trade, it would be this: shipbuilding is a growing field, and there are plenty of options. "We're looking for good people with good attitudes. There's plenty of opportunity with good paying jobs here," he said.

His door is also always open for people who want to learn more about the industry and trades training available.

"I have a young daughter, only two and a half," Schofield said. "In my position, if I can make it easier for her one day to pick jobs that typically women don't take, then yeah—I'll see what I can do."

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