Evelyn Pacheco: Building a Different Future: An Army Veteran in Nevada's Trades

U.S. Army Reserve • Enlisted 1985; later Nevada trades and veterans' leadership

Evelyn Pacheco's story moves from military service to an unexpected kind of public leadership: opening opportunities for women in Nevada's building trades. Born in Chicago and raised in Minneapolis, Pacheco grew up hearing about relatives who had served in the armed forces. At twenty, she decided to enlist in the Army Reserve in 1985 without announcing the decision to her family. She trained in technical maintenance and mechanical repair—skills that fit a lifelong determination to learn demanding work.

Pacheco arrived in Las Vegas in 1999, bringing her children and hoping for a fresh start. After clerical work, she took a job in the engineering department at Fitzgerald's casino. Initially, she was confident about painting but hesitant to tackle other maintenance tasks. Her supervisors trained her to work with plumbing, air-conditioning, electrical systems, and repairs. The experience eventually opened a door to Local 525, the Plumbers and Pipefitters union. "I just went over there and applied," she remembered.

The apprenticeship demanded five years of work, classes, study, and family responsibilities. Pacheco recalled pursuing it while raising three children and working long hours. Her oral history and its preface identify her as Nevada's first Black woman licensed plumber—an important claim to verify separately before final publication. She later founded Nevada Women in Trades, which offers pre-apprenticeship opportunities and works to connect more women with traditionally male-dominated occupations.

Pacheco's public life extends into veterans' organizations, including leadership of American Legion Post 51. Her story is closely tied to Las Vegas: a city sustained not only by its tourism industry but also by the often-invisible labor of maintaining hotels, facilities, and neighborhoods. In her interview, Pacheco reflected on making the city home: "I end up staying, and I haven't left, and I won't. I love Las Vegas." Her path shows that the contributions of veterans continue in workplaces, classrooms, apprenticeships, and community organizations long after their military training ends.

Source Evelyn Pacheco, oral history with Jen S. Martinez and Barbara Tabach, June 27 and August 15, 2023; Veterans' Voices: We're Listening (UNLV, 2024).

Transcript

Evelyn Pacheco

U.S. Army Reserve | Service and Nevada trades

Becoming Nevada's First Black Woman Licensed Plumber

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INTERVIEWER You are, correct me if I'm wrong, the first Black woman plumber.

VETERAN To get a plumber's license.

INTERVIEWER To get a plumber's license in the state of Nevada.

VETERAN Yes.

INTERVIEWER Obviously, you're trade inclined. You said you fixed your bike when you were young. **VETERAN** Yes, that's interesting how I went right back to trades again. Isn't that something? **INTERVIEWER** Yes. And then how did you get into plumbing and pipefitting?

VETERAN Yes, I don't even know. Yes. Because when me and the ex start…I start finding my way back, and I went back to college in Minnesota, and with the kids, too, and figured it out. Sometimes I would have her sitting right there because I had to go to class, and I was determined to get my degree. I wasn't just going to not succeed. Then when I came here, I was working as a secretary because that was my background. I was working for a guy at Cox Cable, and he told me about Fitzgerald's in 2001, which is now Mr. D's, had an opening in the engineering department. I was like, okay. He said, "Well, you'll have more money if you go do that." And I was like, "All right." I went over there and talked with Gene Sagas, and I told him that I knew how to paint. He was like, "What do you mean you know how to paint?" I said, "I know how to paint." He said, "Well, no. I want you to do electrician work. I want you to do the HVAC work." I'm like, "No. I don't know how to do that, but I know how to paint." And I kept saying that to him. "Well, no. You need to do cabinets." "No," I say. Then he says, "Well, if you don't do this, I'm not going to hire you." And I say, "Well, wait a minute." I would go from maybe two hundred a week to now four-fifty a week, so that was a big jump for me. I had the kids and everything. I said, "Okay, I'll do it." He goes,

"We're going to train you and everything." I said, "Okay, whatever." Then I started training how to change out the ACs, how to do the plumbing, how to do soldering, how to do some low-voltage electricity. One other lady that was working at Fitzgerald's in housekeeping

came to me and said her husband, Ernie, is in the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union 525. Again, I'm like, "No, I can't do that." She goes, "Well, you're already doing it over here." I say, "So, this is outside. This would be commercial." These are huge jobs working on the Strip and doing casinos and commercial businesses. That's a whole different ball game. She goes, "No, you need to go do it." I went over there, and I took the math test. I got a letter that I didn't get in but then got a phone call saying I was the luckiest person in Las Vegas, I needed to take the drug test and I start my orientation that Friday. I called Gene Sagas right away and he said I should go and if it doesn't work I can always come back to Fitzgerald's and work.

INTERVIEWER Around what time was this?

VETERAN In 2002, I went and got into the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union. My first year was math. My second year is plumbing. My third year is welding. My fourth year was HVAC. My fifth year was just learning the code and everything combined. And I was working, and I was raising three kids, and I was going to school two nights a week, and for five years I did that and had a hysterectomy in my third year of the apprenticeship when I was 36.

INTERVIEWER Was this more for certifications, or were you also trying to get your degree on top of that?

VETERAN This is to get your journeyman's card in the apprenticeship. You do a five-year apprenticeship. Two nights a week, you go to school, and you work. You might have to work six days. You might have to work twelve hours. You might have to have different shifts. And you've got kids.