

# **The Power of Journeys: Stories and Advice from Apprentice Electricians**

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*"The journey to journeyman is a long one. If I pass all my classes when I am supposed to, I will have spent five and a half years preparing to graduate from being an apprentice. That's almost as long as it takes to become a doctor or lawyer. I am currently a second-year apprentice coming up on my third year, and I think I am becoming more aware of what I have to do on the job. So far, I am doing well in the program and have not failed anything. If I keep this up, then I will become a journeyman, and then the real journey begins."*

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## Introduction

**T**his collage of essays by Local Three apprentice electricians is a window into an interesting and challenging world. Our essays describe the high and low points of our jobs, our struggles and triumphs within the brotherhood and sisterhood of our union. This anthology proves that anything is possible when we all work together.

When we first walked into this college-level writing class and heard what was expected of us, none of us believed that we could do it. After all, we are just blue-collar workers who work with our hands out in the field; we don't sit at desks and write about our lives. As the semester came to a close, however, we found that we all had stories to tell. Our stories center on our futures, a subject that we all have a deep interest in, so the words came swiftly and abundantly.

We each have our own stories, and we also have many stories that were passed to us at our jobs, told to us by journeymen and other trades people that we meet throughout our days. We hear and learn about the past as we begin to create our futures. As this happens, we ourselves start becoming a part of the stories we hear at work, and we make new stories to pass around in the "shanties" to tell to future apprentices for years to come.

These stories were not easily written and could have been more polished with a little more time, but for many of us, what we have created has been very enlightening. We were able to see our careers in a different aspect, one that we may not have even thought of before we started writing these stories. We are not just blue-collar workers; we are an educated group of individuals who have something to share with others, not just with our hands, but also with our minds and with our hearts.

For some of us, this exercise was also a form of therapy, to open up about how we feel about the new world we are entering and how we are helping to rebuild it and survive it. We hope that these stories help new apprentices cope with all the responsibilities required by their trade. We hope that this anthology will remind some people of a fond memory or a labor tale from a past or present shop. Most importantly, we hope our stories bring a little laughter or at least a smile to their day as they read through our experiences while in the apprenticeship of Local Three. Enjoy.

# Fathers, Daughters, Mothers, Brothers, Sisters, Partners

**Megan Finn**

**F**amily. What a loaded, complicated, vivid identity. The word induces a gut reaction and demands a context. The word is enmeshed in history, relationships, roles, challenges, and expectations. In rejection or embrace, family matters. The familial terms of the IBEW Local Three apprenticeship are powerful because they place me, the individual union apprentice, in a family context.

Family stories decipher the context. Stories try to make sense of the history, relationships, roles, challenges, and expectations. Family stories matter because they are about more than the individual storyteller. The stories give shape to the love, frustrations, humor, and anger that go with being a part of a family. I tell home and work family stories because they give me context and because they matter.

## Forefathers

Right after I began my apprenticeship with Local Three, my small crew was transferred to another job. It was kind of a holding pen until yet another job started. This one foreman took a liking to me and a few of the old timers.

It would be me and the Ancients for a couple of months. I learned all the old vaudeville jokes. They scolded me for not seeing classic “Talkie” movies. The Ancients also taught me the virtue of taking time. No sense in having a heart attack or a stroke for the bosses’ benefit. In a short time, I accumulated a wealth of cautionary knowledge about heartburn, cholesterol, and electricity.

## Father Of Us All

*“They wrote as they would not to a brother in the union but to a brother in their family. And he became part of their family if not a brother, then a father, or a father confessor.” (Ruffini, Harry Van Arsdale, Labor’s Champion. p. 98).*

## Got Family In The Business?

The Ancients and I transferred to a bigger job while we waited for a new job to start. There I was introduced to more people in the shop. I was growing accustomed to the “Do you have family in the business?” (AKA who the hell are you and why are you here) line of questioning. People ask if you are related to so and so because they want to place you. The culture of Local Three is very much one of fathers passing their trade down to sons, nephews, and little brothers.

Things have changed enough for people to imagine fathers encouraging their daughters to take up the trade. But a random woman off the street wanting to do this is still a little strange. I do have plenty of kin in the building trades in New England. For many New Yorkers, however, Connecticut might as well be another country.

I’ve been asked countless times when I came to this country. Dude, I was born and raised fifty miles north of you. I explain that I am a recent transplant to New York by way of New Orleans. “You know, because of Katrina. That other bad thing that happened to this country during the Bush presidency.” To this I usually get, “Oh, I was on Bourbon Street for a bachelor party. I was soooo wasted.” On my nicer days I nod politely, privately reminiscing about my French Quarter waitress days spent ripping off drunken guys from New York.

## Dad’s Space

My dad is a closet smoker. Or more accurately, a garage smoker. When he could walk and stand he would spend hours in his garage where he has hundreds of little bins and drawers all lovingly filled with materials and tools.

None of us ever went out to the garage to ask him about these tool bins. I never asked him what their many names and functions were. You couldn’t ask dad a simple question and expect an answer that wasn’t loaded with the million other things he wanted to say about you, the family, and him.

But we all became closet smokers. Each of his daughters picked through the metric ratchet set, admiring the clacky feel of its turn. We all peeked into the many drawers, planning projects. He never hid his Marlboros well or asked what we were looking for out there. He left us alone to share his space.

## Who is Your Daddy?

The first day at a new job site someone asked me, “Who is your daddy?” For some god knows reason I thought that this was Local Three speak for “Who do they have you partnered with, young apprentice?” I responded matter of factly that “J is my Daddy.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

I was a bit taken aback by his reaction but went on my way. Later he came up to my partner and said, “J, I didn’t know you had another daughter.” Then everybody looked really confused and uncomfortable.

## E and J Electric

In many ways my schedule – school and union meetings aside – works out well. I get up before my daughter, E. This way I don’t have to try to get her and myself ready and out the door in time. It just wouldn’t happen. Her father picks her up and brings her to day care on his way to his mid morning start of a day at a cushy but nonprofit desk job. He is able to do this by letting her wear whatever she likes and never combing her long hair.

It’s always a surprise when I pick her up after work. The teachers lecture me about how difficult it is to take her for a walk through the park when she wears plastic dress-up heels, or as we like to call them, “clicky-clack shoes.” Her insistence on wearing them on the wrong feet doesn’t help either. I really got it when she insisted on wearing a bathing suit and tights to school. Apparently this ensemble posed quite some difficulty when the newly trained “big girl” tried to go potty. My 7 a.m. work day start puts me a good two hours away from having to fight and lose about her choice of clothing every morning.

On our way home, we stop by the playground, get some groceries, and pass doggies that need petting. I always ask her about her day, how was school, who did she play with. Unless there was drama with Sophia, one of the older kids at day care, who wouldn’t play with her or she had to sit in time out, I don’t get much of a response from her. I get flashbacks about answering my own parents by grunting a solitary, “Good.” One day though, she asked, “How was your day, mommy?” After crying, I bored her to death about electricity.

When I pick her up, I have to check her cubby hole for last week’s activities and the inappropriate outfits the teacher convinced her to change out of. A couple weeks ago, the kids were studying transportation. By studying, I mean they were singing songs like

“Wheels on the Bus” and playing choo-choo train; they are only three years old, you know. In her cubby hole I found a cut out of a van and on it written Electric Co.

## **Not Without My Daughter**

Not long after broke my ankle and got out on disability, I was hobbling around town. There was a surprising amount of paperwork to fill out and appointments to address. The big tasks at hand were finding a new, smaller, cheaper apartment and trying to get child care subsidies. I wasn't running errands, I was crutching them. My ankle hurt like hell, but I always got a seat on the train.

Picking up E from day care was the best. Half a dozen three year olds would crowd around and ask about my big boo boo. All this was hard on E. She had to grow up a little quicker than she may have been ready too. She had to pick up her things, help set the table for dinner, and come to me when she got hurt instead of me scooping her up. She became a walker when she learned that I couldn't just pick her up or push her in a stroller when she got tired or cold. She learned to trust strangers that helped me help her onto the subway.

I learned that it is nearly impossible to get a kid to leave the playground voluntarily. I'd hobble over and tell her that the final five extra minutes were up and that we were leaving. I would gesture at my pocket suggesting that there might be a piece of kiddy gum for compliance. She would climb to the highest point of the playground equipment. I'd hobble over, but she'd run away. The other parents shook their heads, thinking that sucks. I screamed anything I could think of: “Let's go!” “We can have ice cream for dinner.” “Mommy has to use the potty.” “Please!” After a while, other moms would stop laughing, see my desperation, and actually help me get E out of the gate.

Furious, E would insist on sleeping at her Dad's apartment. Knowing that three year olds are not the most empathetic people still didn't stop my heart from breaking. She was happier to stay with me once we settled into the new apartment (its own nightmare) and I broke down and let her eat those mysterious breaded corn-based chicken bits (chicken nuggets) three times a week with ketchup.

**“My brother knows where the best bars are.”**  
**Lucinda Williams, Crescent City**

Work on Jan. 8 didn't go very smoothly. It was one of these days when for whatever reason you can't hold your tools right, you stumble around, and worse than having the wrong answer, you have no answer at all for the questions you are asked. It was one of those days where everyone asks if you are OK even though you came to work feeling fine and there is nothing physically or mentally wrong with you. One of those days that just point over and over to the fact that it's not the situation that's wrong, just you. Something was wrong with me.

I was glad when the work day was over. Glad to meet up with a buddy from my last job. We were both going through divorces. I was looking forward to commiserating with someone on Team Megan.

While waiting for my friend to get there, I fussed with this split fingernail. I had cut it entirely in half chopping onions. When it happened, I knew that the next day I would be lectured at daycare about my darling little voice recorder quoting me verbatim. Construction didn't make me a potty mouth, being a clumsy cook did.

The split nail was one of those little wounds that have a constant presence. After fiddling with it all day, I ripped it out. This produced more choice words. When a cop came over and asked what I was doing. I just waved my bloody fingertip and said I was fine. It bothered me that I had lost control and caused a little scene.

I met my friend N and we had a few beers. I got to complain about my ex, my shitty day, and mainly about my sore fingertip.

What am I doing, I asked. I am not good at this job. I told him that I wasn't particularly proud of my work and that I just didn't get it. So many in the trades are such braggarts. They tell stories about how they single handedly saved the job all the while wooing the ladies, putting the boss in his place, and being the only mother fucker who truly knew what was going on. Humility isn't a virtue. Even the first year apprentices I came in with were talking like that. Give me a break. Where's the team effort? Well, I'm no hero.

More friends from old jobs came to the bar, and our mood lightened. Recently they had been laid off, but they were basking in their astounding skill and strength. It made me feel that there is good along with the bad and it's best to try to do your best, learn, and get along with people.

## Team Awesome

N and I humbly assumed the title “Team Awesome. It caught on quickly. For every “Team Awesome” scribbled on unfinished walls, there were five more “Team Awesome Sux” written elsewhere. Out of love of course. We pimped our cart with signs and made pins and t-shirts. Team Awesome was inseparable.

## Broken. Home.

I brought my bike to work one day as part of my “new year, new me” plan. I was going to save travel money and get in shape. My ex had started a horribly obnoxious sit-up campaign. I urgently needed to show him up or at least not let him appear more dateable than me. How dare he leave and become better looking. I am aware that this motivation wasn’t particularly profound or even healthy but I liked bike commuting so it wasn’t a sacrifice.

Later that day, when it dawned on me that a quick afternoon sip had devolved into a night of drinking, I left a bar in a rush. My ex was with my daughter, and this was usually his night to go out. Plus I had to work the next day and wanted to try to get well rested. It was icy, dark, and I had a few beers in me, so I decided to be safe and take my bike on the train. I got off the train three blocks from my house and rode my bike those last three blocks. At the final block, I waited for the crossing light.

The impact came at some point between the side of the street I left and the side of the street I was aiming for. Time and space distorted. I don’t remember actually getting hit, but I remember thinking, “This isn’t happening.” One moment I was on a bike, and then the next I was lying on the street surrounded by people. According to the police, not one of the dozens of people near me or on either side of that busy intersection really saw the car as it sped away. One witness said the car was black. That was helpful.

I tried to get up and hobble home, but I was strapped to a board and told that I might have a head injury. The first responders asked me to call people and find my wallet. I was shaking and embarrassed. I managed to call A to apologize for not making it home and to say that I was going to the hospital. I guess I sounded calm because he thought it was no big deal.

At Kings County I got scanned, x-rayed, ignored, and plastered – with a cast of course. I didn’t hurt the old brain although hopefully I did knock some sense into it. They gave me a thigh-high cast for my

fractured ankle. After ten miserable hours, I left Kings County Hospital on a freezing January morning wearing nothing but a backless gown and hospital slippers.

## **Family Therapy**

The Apprentice-Journeyman partnership is as varied as the individual apprentice and mechanic are. But there is always a dynamic of power and trust. Apprentices depend on the journeyman to teach them the tricks of the trade. New apprentices are a blank slate. Useful and not so useful lessons are impressed upon them. Only with time and experience does an apprentice begin to learn what's useful and what's not. Even though the construction industry is very transitory, with crews constantly moving and breaking up, partners work side by side for hours each day and share meals, work, and gossip. If partners gel, they get to know each other thoroughly. It makes all the difference in the world if the journeyman and apprentice actually enjoy being around each other.

Listening is a huge part of the job, for apprentices anyway. They are listening for directions, instructions, warnings, and encouragement. Journeymen have a captive audience. I was the sounding board for gripes about wives, daughters, and mothers. "Why do you women do that?" they would ask as if every woman were the same. "Because you deserve it," I'd reply. I'm no Oprah.

## **Big Brothers**

"You know you have a bunch of big brothers here that would love to have a little talk with him, you just say the word."

"Thanks guys, I'll think about it."

## **Little Brother**

As kids my brother and I were pretty close. Now we aren't.

## **Mother's Helper**

At the hospital, the nurses asked if there were anyone at home to help. A had just moved out a few days earlier, and we were just trying to figure out how to function as co parents. That day at the bar I received a call that FEMA was no longer assisting with rent. So A

and I were facing big financial burdens by having two apartments and a kid in day care. Still, I had faith that with extra overtime and some belt tightening we would manage.

My disability pay was a pittance. My faith in things working out if we just make it through the next few months had been shaken. I told the nurses that it was just me and my three year old. They wished me luck. This was Kings County and I was hardly one of the desperate cases. When I got home, A was deeply asleep not answering his phone or hearing the door bell. I stood on one leg crying for half an hour. Finally I got into my apartment and collapsed on my daughter's bed. She was asleep in mine. I called my foreman to say that I wouldn't be coming to work for awhile and would call later with the details.

The next few days I was flooded with calls and visitors. The job did a collection for me as did my old job. A was very helpful, which was a little awkward since he had just moved out just a few days before. Some of my out-of-work friends served as personal assistants and fellow Judge Brown viewers. I uneasily learned how to ask for help and rely on people I hadn't before. I hated and loved it.

## **Baby Sister**

My little sister M came down to help out. She said that the toes that peeked out of my cast were nasty and that too many people were going to look at my feet for me to go around like that. Disgusted, she lovingly sanded down the work boot calluses and polished the toenails "old lady pink." My selection of nail polish had been nicked from my kindergarten teacher mother, and my sister hated it. Nevertheless, doctor appreciated the effort.

Maybe eight years ago, my sister M bought a CD by an anorexic bubblegum "punk" pop star. She immediately began playing the album without any intention of ever stopping. M especially adored this one song about not fakin' or whatever. Prematurely assuming that nothing could ever be as torturous as this incessant whining and my sister's accompaniment, I, with the full support of the rest of my family, destroyed the CD. She vowed never to speak to me again. Fortunately, she had relented by the time I broke my ankle. For my part, I admit I was wrong about her music.

## Public Radio

While out on disability, I decided to listen to all the music and radio talk shows that I liked. Leonard Lopate, not Amos and Andy. *This American Life*, not sports talk. I knew that I would miss this when I went back to work. It's like you are only allowed to play classic rock at work. This in itself isn't the problem. The problem is that the radio stations play the same ten songs over and over again. Billy Joel is constantly singing into a microphone that smells like a beer. Axel Rose always screams for Patience. The Boss is born to run. Mr. Jovi is living on a prayer. And John Cougar Mellencamp has a thing for little pink houses. I have to admit, I do get a rise out of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing." My karaoke performances have been improved by this constant exposure to classic rock.

One day I brought in a playlist to work and a little radio to play it on. Ye who owneth the radio shall chooseth the music. It was a Saturday overtime shift and only a few of us electricians were there, so I thought it would be safe. Sure enough, I got teased mercilessly and told to turn that shit off. They said my music was whiny chick ballads. Never mind that most of the singers were men. Finally when I had punched down the data cables for a couple of days, I was allowed to work in a closet by myself and listen to whatever I wanted. Three days of Radio Lab and Democracy Now podcasts, three days of belting out my favorite chick ballads. It was a strictly Billy Joel-free zone.

Music is a big deal at work. It keeps the pace and lightens the mood. I have heard it argued that slave traders allowed music aboard their ships because the stolen Africans were more likely to survive the murderous passage. Workers have always sung while working and about work. You have the rhythm of trains, the driving beats of industry, and the sounds of tools. Music accomplishes what no manager or boss could. With music, workers keep working and stay content. The right music can set the pace and attitude.

Classic rock is mostly loud, mainly white, usually male, and quite popular on construction sites. There is also a lot of hip hop, Latin, and other popular music, but classic rock has defiantly dominated the places where I have worked. Classic rock lyrics are fairly simple and very familiar. A construction worker can sing along without worrying that the tools and machine are drowning out the music. Anyone can sing Pinball Wizard with or without The Who.

## Christmas Music

Just when I thought I had had enough of Elton John and Led Zeppelin, my partner changed the station to all-Christmas music all the time. My partner was a very kind elder gentleman, and the Christmas radio was his decades-long tradition. I kept my torment to myself and even occasionally sang along. Inwardly, I wanted to beat John Lennon and his children's choir. "So this is Christmas, I'll show you Christmas!" I was forced to "Rock Around the Christmas Tree" from November 25th to December 24th. By then, I had so much hatred towards all things "merry" that I didn't get too upset about bypassing Christmas altogether while E was with her father in Wisconsin. Instead of roasting chestnuts on the open fire or whatever you're supposed to do, I watched Spinal Tap, a rock mockumentary classic.

## Weaning

A few weeks before I began the apprenticeship, A asked me, "So are you going get all bulked up?" Have I mentioned that my romantic relationship with A didn't work out? I'm not sure how I responded, but I can safely say that it probably not a patient and understanding, "Of course dear, I will find a magic way to become strong enough to do this physically demanding job and not eat crappy food while I am running between work, school, and picking up E. I promise to stay slim and pretty just for you, my charming prince." No, it was probably some combination "choice words" that I thought were still safe to say in front of E. The reader should know that I'm actually very close friends with A and love him very much, but like in any close friendship, the teasing can sometimes get ugly. Anyway, his question didn't bother me so much as it festered a year later when my baggy work jeans weren't baggy anymore.

Egg sandwiches were a revelation. I had eaten egg sandwiches before, but I had never experienced so many combinations. On rolls, on croissants, on wheat, with cheese, and not just with any cheese, but with cheddar, swiss, or muenster, and the list goes on. An apprentice worth anything knows how to get sandwiches bought for them by different journeymen. If you are good, you should have some money left to take yourself out to lunch and get a beer after work. My partner and I developed this sandwich called "The Sloppy." We consulted the experts and tried many variations. Ultimately we came up with two eggs over easy with provolone, home fries, and salami on a toasted roll: The Sloppy.

When I started working full time, I had to wean E. She was nearly two and a mommy-milk junkie. She would reach for me and say “Cuddle.” Most times this was cute, but often it took the form of a screaming order “CUDDLE! MOMMY! *CUDDLE!*” In addition to the much needed benefits and income, work was my escape from bitten nipples and constant feedings. While breastfeeding my parasite, my love, I had to eat six meals a day just to keep up and yet I still kept losing weight. I was a little worried that if I weren’t producing milk, I couldn’t eat like a cow. But I was excited about the electrician’s apprenticeship and it was time to start working again.

I thought it would be harder to get E off the Ta Tas. But she was ready and began to enjoy real food, especially egg sandwiches. I make really good egg sandwiches.

## Sugar

I had a foreman who insisted on having twenty sugars in his tea. Yes, I had to count twenty sugar packets or count to twenty five slowly. Or I could fill the sugar two inches up the cup. I would go to a deli where you could make the coffee yourself. Otherwise the counter guys would scream, “Sugar’s not free miss,” or “That’s not good for you,” or “That’s disgusting.” I think that the people who saw me make his tea assumed I was stoned and just not paying attention.

One day I brought back a tea with only fifteen sugars, so my foreman made me go back and get another one. Sure there was a plentitude of sugar packets on the table in our shanty, but that wouldn’t work. Clearly I didn’t understand the mechanics of how the hot tea water liquefies the sugar properly only if the sugar is already in the cup. I had been a waitress for six years, but this guy had been prepping himself for adult-onset diabetes for decades.

At this point the Ancients would tell me to relax and not get my blood pressure so high. “This is all part of the apprentice experience,” they would say. They forgot that in their day there were no such things as lattes and light iced mochas or fifteen choices of cheese and bread for a freaking egg sandwich.

If this twenty-sugar business had ended by the end of the coffee break, then I would have gotten over it by 10 a.m. This guy, however, loved his tea all day long. Each tea had to have the twenty sugars. I’d be doing something, maybe something productive or maybe not. “TEA!!!” So off I went to fetch him another. One day he saw me eating a kabob at lunch and demanded to know where I got it. I told him about this cart around the corner. This being outside and more

than ten feet away, it was way beyond his reach. He was busy, after all, drinking tea and lecturing about the state of the world. So in addition to “TEA!” he began yelling “MEAT!!”

Being so new at the trade, I just assumed that his behavior, while infuriating, was normal. I figured that a ten-minute stroll around the block for a kabob or sugar fix was worth showing up late once in awhile or for the occasional long weekend.

But as a slightly older and marginally wiser apprentice, I let everybody, EVERYBODY put in their own sugar.

# The 40-year-old Apprentice

## Nicholas Del Re

### Pizza boy

**M**y first steady job after getting my driver's license was delivering pizzas for a local pizzeria. The owner saw that I was a fast learner and committed to the job, so he started to teach me how to make the pizzas instead of delivering them. This took a lot of pressure off of his back and as he saw that he could trust me, he began to allow me to open his store for him in the mornings and close up for him at night. I really enjoyed what I was doing, but I wanted to know more, so I applied at the NY Restaurant School in Manhattan to see if there was a career for me in this trade.

### Chef Nick

The school set up internships with 2 excellent and renowned restaurants for me: "Sign of the Dove" and "Tavern on the Green." After school I got my first job at the "21" Club. I worked in corporate dining at NYMEX, at Columbia University, in the Trustee's Dining Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at the Ford Foundation, and at Windows on the World atop the World Trade Center. Each job put more and more pressure on me, but I was so enamored to be working in such high profile places that I simply took it all in stride and pushed through each task I faced.

### My Lucky Day Off

All of that changed on 9/11/2001. I am here today thanks to my two beautiful twins, Peter Vincent and Julia Marie, who were only eight months old in September 2001. I had worked out a schedule for September 11th with my boss at Windows so that I could stay home and watch my children during the day while my wife worked. This gave my mother in law a day off, since she watched our children the rest of the week while my wife and worked. So, on that fateful Tuesday

morning, at about 8:55 am, I was feeding my twins when I received a phone call from my sister, who was surprised and very relieved that I had answered the phone.

## **The Turning Point**

My sister told me what was happening in Manhattan and had me turn on the TV to watch the events of the day unfold. I watched in disbelief; 74 of my friends and colleagues perished on that fateful morning. At first it all seemed like a dream, as if it didn't really happen; I mean, how could this actually happen, here in NY, in America? It couldn't be real, but it was, and it took a long time for me to try and get over it while moving on with my life and career. I tried to continue in the restaurant business, but my feelings about what had happened, and the way I was treated by those that I knew in this business, all led me to feel that it was time to move on.

## **New Direction**

I had been a cook and chef for 17 years prior to 9/11, and now I was ready for a change. When I sent in my application for the Local Three Apprenticeship Program, I had no idea what I was getting into. I was starting this career change late, since I was about 36 when I applied, but I had worked in construction in the past and felt that I could handle the workload. The benefits package was a huge inspiration since I had a wife and twins at home to support. My wife's cousin got me an application to fill out, I passed every interview, aptitude test, and physical that I had to, so I am starting over again at 38 years old. I know I'm only an apprentice and have not seen everything yet, but so far I love my job, probably for the first time in my life. The workload varies from day to day, but it has not made me regret my decision ... yet.

## **Fast Learner**

I have been fortunate enough to have worked with some good mechanics who have taught me how to get the job done without getting stressed or hurt in the process. Although most apprentices are told to observe rather than actually work, I feel my age and my experience have proven that I am capable of actually getting my tools dirty from time to time. I have been given me tasks to complete, with or without a mechanic to watch over me, and have shown that I am a good worker and a fast learner.

## **Time Flying By**

Talking to other apprentices, I have been told that I should tell the mechanics that I am not supposed to be doing certain things as an apprentice; they say that I should refuse. In my defense, I am 40 years old, and I don't have the time to sit and back and observe for my five years as an apprentice and then still work 30 or more years after that until the retirement kicks in.

## **Where's The Kid?**

I'll be lucky if I can work 25 years in this union until my mind and body give up on me. I'm already having back pains, banged-up knees, and sore legs and feet, and I'm only in my fourth year. I want to learn this business as quickly as I can, the right way, and for me that means learning it hands on. I'm not going to learn by watching someone else do something, or from a book showing me a picture or a diagram. The best way for me to learn is by getting my hands dirty and experiencing it for myself. This also helps me get over any fears I may have about what I am doing. I have acquired many new skills in my first three years and am impressed when I can use them to complete my tasks in an organized and professional manner. My foremen and mechanics have seen my ambition to learn and have given me jobs to see how I handle the pressure and if I can figure them out on my own. I gladly welcome the challenge.

## **Walsh Electric**

The first shop I worked for did mostly residential work and service calls. I had to get involved and not just observe what my mechanic was doing. My first job was to wire up a new house. I had to drill holes in the wood studs, pull BX cables through the studs, mount metal boxes for both switches and outlets, and finally, splice the wires together to prepare them for installation. My mechanic laid out the rooms with me, but then left me to work on my own. The holes had to be drilled evenly in order to get a smooth pull of the BX cable, and the boxes had to be measured to specific heights for the switches and outlets in each room. There was a lot to do, but the pace was comfortable and there was no pressure about what had to be done. This was something I did not expect.

## **Past Pressures**

In the restaurant business, there is pressure to get everything prepared for service, pressure to get the food out to the customers in a timely fashion, and pressure on the workers to produce, produce, and produce until the day finally comes to an end, when the workers are pressured to arrive on time the next day so that the pressure can start all over again.

## **My First Day**

At 8:30 am my mechanic sent me out to get coffee for us. I returned around 9 a.m., and we sat down and rested until about 9:45. We then worked until 11:30 when I was sent out again to get lunch. At noon, we sat for an hour and ate outside on the front steps of the house, out in the sun. We then went back to work again, and the day ended at 3:30. I left my first day on the job happy but confused. The pace of the job was comfortable with no tension or pressure; it felt like something was wrong. The next day, however, passed about the same way.

## **Gaining Trust**

My mechanic had been in the business for over 20 years and had wired so many houses by this time that the job actually bored him. I, however, was excited by the opportunity to wire my first house and to work alone most of the time to complete my tasks. A lot of that had to do with my age and my past experiences. I didn't need to be watched over by my mechanic because I knew what the job required and took the initiative to get in and get dirty to complete the job.

## **On the Jobs**

The jobs that followed were mostly residential, either new constructions or renovations, or we were troubleshooting a problem on a service call. The jobs were interesting but not overly difficult; anyone with half a brain could easily figure out most of the wiring.

## **My Ambition**

My ambition convinced my boss that I was worth keeping, and when my one-year rotation came up, he got an extension to keep me. I was surprised, after only one year, how much I had actually learned about this new business. I learned how to properly drill holes and

pull wires through them, how to install switches and outlets correctly and at the required height, and how to assemble and install lighting fixtures and ceiling fans in both residential and commercial buildings. I learned how to troubleshoot problems in old and new houses and, especially, how to respect electricity because of what it can do to you and your tools if you don't. I burned up two pliers in my first year, which was an expensive lesson at \$35 each.

## **High Anxiety**

The shop had two boom trucks to work on lights in parking lots and high on buildings. At first I was a little nervous about getting into these lifts, but over the course of the year, I was comfortable with them and actually looked forward to working in them. Again, my friends at school told me that I wasn't supposed to be up in the lifts as an apprentice. I would say that I wanted to learn how to control the lifts comfortably and safely, and the only way to do that was to get off my ass and learn. I wasn't going to be an apprentice who just watched the electrical work and then concentrated on getting the coffee orders right so that the mechanics would give him a dollar tip. For me, operating the lifts was exciting and a chance to get over my fears of it. I really enjoyed my first shop and appreciated everything I learned from the great mechanics I worked with.

## **J.H. Electric**

My second shop was in Manhattan working with J.H. Electric. When I first showed up at the job, I was a little overwhelmed. I had not done construction in the city for over 20 years, and even that was only on small offices or store fronts. My new job was at a four-story parking garage for the Department of Sanitation located off the West Side Highway. There were no windows on the building, and many of the walls were missing, so I began to have a negative attitude. Still, because of my age, the foreman allowed me to work on certain projects on my own. I spent my first day driving around with the straw learning where the job material was located and what I would be responsible for as the only apprentice. My second day, I was driving a forklift up and down the ramps, picking up small dumpsters of garbage and dumping them into a large dumpster on the second floor. I moved boom lifts and scissor lifts around and used them to install temporary lighting for the job.

## **My New Assignment**

I was also given the job of installing pipes in walls that did not exist yet, trying to stay ahead of the “brickies” who were quickly putting up walls whether they were ready or not. There were power threading machines called Rigid 300s that would cut, ream out, and thread a pipe in one shot; one tool doing the job of three. These machines were tremendous in helping me keep up the fast pace I needed. There were also benders for all sizes of pipes from a half inch up to four inches, either galvanized or EMT. These were tools I had only seen in school, so I didn’t know how to use them properly, but after a brief introduction, I was sent on my way to figure that out. Luckily, all the measurements, deductions, additions, and adjustments that I was taught actually worked, so I was able to avoid looking like a beginner when I started using these tools.

## **Getting the Low Down**

My job responsibilities became more and more challenging as the foreman saw what I was capable of. My bosses constantly showed me different aspects of the job, from reading blueprints, to motor controls, pump controls, fire alarm systems, relay switches, damper motors, PA systems, using taps and shrink wrap on feeders in large overhead pull boxes, and wiring up panel boards. I learned more in one year with this new shop than I did during the year and a half that I spent in my first shop. I enjoyed the comfort and convenience of my first shop, but had I stayed there, I would have never known what I am now capable of doing.

## **The Redneck**

My first two days in the shanty were pretty uneventful, but on Monday I met two new journeymen and a new apprentice, while two existing journeymen left the job. LET THE GAMES BEGIN! These two journeymen were a breath of fresh air to an otherwise run-down shanty. One was a true redneck from Pennsylvania who drove a dirty green pickup truck that he seldom washed. He was an Army Reservist with a crew cut and, as we quickly learned, was a huge pain in the ass when it came to discussing anything. He always felt that he knew more than anyone else. His response to anything we said to him always began with the phrase, “Yeah, but no ... ” He did this so many times that we began to answer him in the same way, but that never changed him.

There were times I wanted to jump over the table and tape his mouth shut, but he did keep things interesting by getting everyone's heart rate up. He and I were constantly playing pranks on each other; or, I would play pranks on him and he would try unsuccessfully to retaliate. My favorite was when I wrapped his truck in toilet paper, then took a picture of it, and sent it to him on his cell phone. Another time I used black electrical tape and spelled out the words WHY on his rear window because whenever I told him what I was doing with my own life, his answer always began with (you guessed it), "Why?"

### **Tony Merola**

The redneck by himself could be an annoying ball buster, but his partner really transformed that job for me. The partner's name was Tony, a loud, animated Italian with over 26 years in the business who took pride in doing what he did best: terrorize authority. I found a picture of Teddy Roosevelt in a Time magazine and brought it to show Tony, because they looked exactly alike. Tony had a long, droopy moustache, and with his big nose and glasses, he looked great when he did his Groucho impression.

However, it wasn't Tony's looks that stirred up the crew, but his personality. Tony had seen many shops in his 26 years and knew exactly what he could get away with and how. He was unafraid to speak his mind, either to management about a job-related incident or to a fellow coworker about a baseball team. Tony's stories were hysterical and kept us rolling at every break. He had been busting chops since he was an apprentice, and it only got worse after that. His antics inspired me with a new confidence about this industry and showed me that I don't have to accept every situation that I face; I have the power to change my situation until it is right for me.

Some of Tony's antics were for fun, but others were intended to let the administration or the "basic" shop guys know that he wouldn't be pushed around. Tony alienated many of the shop guys with his constant storytelling and loud, boisterous laugh, and the shoppies would look down at him, even though Tony has ten times their experience and knowledge. Their opinion of him didn't bother Tony because he refused to get stressed out about anyone or anything. A doctor once wanted Tony to take a stress test, but Tony told him he had the wrong guy. Tony's motto is, "If you can't come to work and have a good time, then it isn't worth coming in at all."

Those who accepted Tony and put up with his steady stream of stories, myself included, knew that he had a lot to teach to new apprentices. The best part about Tony was that he treated everyone equally, no matter what their rank or position. When he first introduced himself to me, he shook my hand and asked me, “Are you a Yankee fan or a Met fan?” I answered, “A Met fan.” His response, “Don’t ever speak to me again!” But he and I became great friends on the job, and he never looked down on me as an apprentice and actually took my side during many discussions.

Tony gave me a new goal in this business. He lives every day to its fullest, and although he may not give his job 100%, he made sure to give his day 100%. It isn’t the job that excites him; it is the people on the job that he looks forward to being with every day.

### **Is It Too Late For Me?**

So what is it like being a 40 year old apprentice? It has its’ ups and downs but I feel I have been lucky in where I have been so far, as I have heard horror stories from mechanics of what their apprenticeships were like. Most of them came into the union at an earlier age, so they were pushed around more than I was. My age has definitely helped me earn the respect of the mechanics faster, as well as my ambition and work ethic. I am not some dumb kid who is still not sure if this is what he wants to do with his life. I don’t believe in standing around, watching others work, and waiting for my A-card until I can finally get my hands dirty. I have a family to support and cannot rely on mommy and daddy to bail me out if my rent or car payment is due.

### **My New Career**

I had a first career and was getting by with it, but all that ended on September 11, 2001, and now I have a new way to make a living. Electricians face many dangers on a daily basis, but most of those dangers come from taking chances and making dumb decisions. With the right training and always being aware of what you are dealing with, this can be an extremely rewarding field. I know I made the right career choice. Someday it’ll be me sitting in the shanty on a job telling a new TA-1 apprentice about my experiences in this local and laughing about all the things I have done.

## **Final Note**

I will always remember a quote from a tired old mechanic I met on this job, when he looked at me and said condescendingly, “So you want to be an Electrician?” My response, “I’m 40 years old, I have to be something.” Agreed.

# My Boots

Thomas McCormack

## My Boots ...

**M**y boots are brown Timberland Pros, size 10½, with nubuck leather uppers and a welted lug outsole. They are safe, comfortable, and tough. There is a lot I could tell you about my boots. I could tell you step by step how they are manufactured and how the manufacturer chose all of the materials that were used. I could tell you what year Timberland first made my boots, how many pairs they've sold since, and where my boots rank in popularity when compared to other work boots on the market. I could tell you all that because my boots are very important, and I wouldn't be able to do my job without them.

But so much more interesting than what my boots went through before they got to the store is what they (and I) went through once I bought them home. Whatever I've seen on the job, whatever I've heard on the job, and whatever I've done on the job, my boots were right there with me.

They say you shouldn't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes. Well, that's exactly what I'd like you to do. So why don't you strap on your choice of footwear and take a walk down memory lane with me and my boots.

## Trying Them On ...

It was the Tuesday before my first day as a Local Three electrician. My neighbor and good friend K.J., also an electrician, was going to help me secure everything on my "tool list." Wow! I remember having this anxious feeling, the kind when you're about to meet your girlfriends parents for the first time. I couldn't stop looking at myself in the mirror and wondering ... Do I look like an electrician? Do I have what it takes to work on construction sites? Will the guys make fun of me if I eat my sandwich on a multigrain roll? The more questions I asked, the more outlandish they got, and the multigrain thing snowballed into: Will they think that because I eat healthy food, that I don't have

any good sex stories to share? Do I have to share my sex stories now? I was leaving my job as a waiter in a health food café to becoming a construction worker ... a pretty big step.

Anyhow, K.J. was ready and set to go with me on my journey to Home Depot to buy what would be my first set of tools. I think it was more fun for him than me. “Ooohh Tommy, you have to get this conduit buddy” and “Oh-oh-oh, check out this new Klein hacksaw, the grip has a cushion.” I thought, what the hell is a conduit buddy and what the fuck do I need a hacksaw for? Three hundred and fifty dollars later, all my tools were asleep in their new home, a big red shiny box with the word Husky written in bold letters along the top and sides. The Husky box was another thing that K.J. insisted I must get.

Next I needed some new work clothes. Being the good Brooklyn guy I am, it’s a rule to always look sharp. A couple pairs of Carhartt jeans, some Dickies work shirts, a sweatshirt or two, and then off to the boot section. Ahhh, the boot section. I remember the ankle support and the instant satisfaction of leaving behind a career where farting, picking your nose, and cursing are not allowed. That was the day I first tried them on my boots.

### **Breaking Them In ...**

My brand new boots and I were on the 15th Street platform around 5:30 a.m. and heading to 4 Times Square for a 7 a.m. start. I was told to leave early and give myself time to find the jobsite. That was the last time I was on that platform before 6 a.m. for a 7 clock start. I got to the job as “green” as green could be. Brand new boots, Carrharts with no holes in them, and a tool box as bright and big as a fire truck. Yup, I looked like a dick. Little did I know that the Husky toolbox that K.J. said I must have was his way of saying “Welcome aboard.”

My first task was to disconnect and pack up all the computers on the floor so that the movers could get them ready for shipment. The movers weren’t allowed to remove the plugs or touch the computers while they contained electricity. So here I was my first duty as an electrician, and I didn’t even get to use any of the awesome tools I just bought. Bummer! But the job was laid back, and I was slowly learning what it would be like to be in a union. Only the laborers can pick up the garbage, glaciers are the only ones allowed to handle glass, tin knockers handle tin, carpenters the sheetrock, and so on. Learning the language of the union construction industry was a chore in itself. Later

on that day, I was doing what I considered to be real electric work, mounting boxes on studs and pulling BX cable from room to room. That day I got a chance to use a half dozen of the tools in my box, my boots got a little wear, and nobody wanted to hear any sex stories from me. That day I also brought back the stinkin' red tool box to Home Depot and picked up a Klein canvas tote, which seemed to be the bag of choice amongst those who would be my new brothers. That day I waltzed around in my Tims with tools in my hand and a Kool-Aid smile. It was the first of many days for me to get some scruff in the leather and wear in the rubber soles, but that day I broke them in.

### **Wearing Them with Pride ...**

Flatline. That was the nickname they gave to my first partner Jimmy, a plump Irish guy in his late fifties who walked the jobsite with a Marlboro dangling from his mouth and feasted on ham, egg, swiss, and sausage sandwiches (you read right, two meats) every day for coffee break. He was so much fun to work with. He loved to teach apprentices, and he loved to tell stories. He would tell me stories about when he was young and would fool around with his female cousins and how he just recently got caught masturbating by his eighty-year-old mom. Now of course all the stories he told didn't contain sexual behavior, but these are the ones I just happen to remember. I mean c'mon, pleasuring yourself and getting caught by your eighty-year-old mom? That's just crazy! And gross.

I don't remember exactly what we were working on at that time but I do remember Jimmy taking his time to show me exactly how and why each application works. He showed me the ropes. Most importantly, Jimmy taught me how to have fun at work and to have thick skin. Since I grew up in Brooklyn, the thick skin capitol of the world, I fit right in. I soon had nicknames for and ranks on every journeyman on the job.

The only place I'd go before stopping home to change out of my boots was Farrell's. Farrell's is my favorite bar in the world and as luck would have it, right down the block from my apartment. Farrell's is an old bar from the 1930s that prides itself on its ice-cold Budweiser draft served in a thirty-two ounce container for under five bucks. Farrell's is chockfull of cops, fireman, and union construction workers, so it's only natural that shop talk would be the topic of choice. I remember going into the bar and not understanding what the heck any of my buddies were talking about.

Now I can join in the conversations at Farrell's, giving my opinion on the throw of a Hilti or the hum of a transformer. No matter how unpleasant the morning went or what a douche my partner was, I know that I can stroll off the train and head into Farrell's. There, it doesn't matter that my clothes are soiled from the day, my shirt riddled with dust and dirt, my pants greasy, and my boots covered in muck. In Farrell's, I got to wear them with pride.

### **Wearing Them Out ...**

I soon had the idea that my feet were the most important part of my body and dubbed them "my money makers." Being on your feet all day is tough, I'm not gonna lie. Sometimes I pretend I'm on the bowl shitting just so I can rest my dogs for a couple. I'm also guilty of not giving up my seat on the train to the elderly or pregnant because I just can't bear to stand another second. I'll be sitting comfortably on the F train at 34th Street and the doors will open up for the rats to enter their final lap of their race, and I just look down so I don't have to make eye contact with Grandma Tilly or Octomom. Quite frankly, I believe it's good for both parties to stand for a ride anyway because I'd bet both were probably on their rumps all day in a nice air-conditioned building.

But seriously, the old-timers on the job have all kinds of aches and pains thanks to thirty-plus years in the industry. Permanent ladder marks on their shins is an odd one, but common discomforts include heel-spurs, arthritis, loss of hearing, carpal tunnel syndrome, and rotator cuff syndrome. Because of all the heavy lifting and vibrating tools, knees give out, back and neck injuries occur and all that's left is a gimp of a man with dry hands and a permanent cough from breathing in debris. My boots and I will be fine, and because of all the injuries and mishaps before me, I will make sure to wear proper safety devices and know my limits. In fact, I look forward to wearing my boots out.

### **A day as an apprentice in my boots ...**

Some of my friends say "Oh, you're in Local Three ... them guys don't do nothin'!" I guess in some sense they're right. Let me tell you what life in my first pair of boots was like. A typical Monday started in the shanty around 6:45 am with fifteen minutes of "How ya doin'?" This slowly turned into a safety meeting. Safety meetings are held by the foreman, the shop steward, or both. A safety meeting takes place once a week and gives everyone a chance to have voice and share some

past mishap or disaster in order to teach a lesson. Usually the meeting is about 20 minutes or so, and then it's off to my favorite part of the day, the time when I can roam the site freely and collect money from the journeymen, asking "Whatcha want for coffee?"

Most journeymen took this as an invitation to ask me a question in return, like "How was your weekend?" or "Did you get paid for Friday?" But the asking the questions was my job: "Do you want it toasted?" or "How many sugars do you take?" Now, I know I like to talk, but some of these older guys just don't know when to shut up. Al would tell me how he padlocked the fridge because his stepson ate too much, and then Frank would ask me every single detail about my weekend in the creepiest way as if he were envisioning me in a thong or something. I guess you can say it was a motley crew, but it was always entertaining.

So off to the deli I went with my makeshift cooler, my coffee list, and about sixty bucks. This part I had down to a science. First, I ordered my breakfast (on the house, of course) and then sat like a gentleman and rewrote the coffee list while eating. When I finished eating, I handed in the order so I could read the paper. The good life of an apprentice. I rarely made a mistake with the order and almost every time, I was back in the shanty by 9 a.m. On some jobs, the foreman prefers the men to have coffee in their work area, meaning that I have to find every journeyman on the job and while their coffee is still hot. That's not exactly how I've wanted my boots to be used, but I understand that it's part of the job.

This reminds me of Steve, a funny guy on the job. You see, when you have coffee in your work area, the foreman really doesn't know when you started the break. So Steve would finish his coffee, poke a hole in the bottom of his cup, and put a lit cigarette inside to make it appear that the cup was still full of smoking-hot coffee. This would give us an extra 15 minutes or so of break time. I worked with Steve on cold jobs, and he used to duct tape a heated blanket to himself and then plug it into a hundred foot extension cord so he had room to roam. Steve was a character, but he was cool. He always bought me coffee. Most guys did give you a little money for yourself, so going for coffee was beneficial in that respect.

After coffee, I would be assigned to a partner and then it was off to work. A good apprentice is always a step ahead of the guy he's working with. If John was working on a cable tray, I would make sure to have the next piece along with the proper wrench in my hands for him to use next. I was a good apprentice, and guys always asked to

have me as their partner. After coffee, the rest of the day sorta flew by. Come to think of it, my five and a half years as an apprentice flew by as well. A few different pairs of boots were worn through by this point, but each had the same brown leather uppers by Timberland, and each had different stories.

### **Idle Tie, Taking Poops, and Wandering Around In My Boots ...**

There were guys who took off every Friday, guys who stayed at the bar too long for lunch break, guys who came in late, and then there were those who talked a lot instead of working. I was one of those guys who liked drifting around the jobsite to hang out with the funny people. Yeah, I got some of the work done, but I was an apprentice, so what did they expect? There was so much fun to be had and so many cuckoos to have it with. I remember spending a whole day just putting together a practical joke and booby traps.

Wandering around allowed my boots to collect the necessary debris and dust they needed to look legit. I created this game called “Name That Trade.” You had to name a worker’s trade just by looking at his boots. Brickies’ boots had a tint of red or cement drippings on them, and the carpenters’ boots were laced with sheetrock dust and sometimes even had insulation or other related material stuck to them. An electrician’s boots were the cleanest but usually had tape stuck to the soles. There were guys who loved their boots so much they would polish ‘em up on a daily basis, but there were also guys who couldn’t wait to take their boots off. Older guys tended to take their boots off at the end of the day and switch into sneakers; they claimed that this saved their feet. I tried this for a week, leaving my boots in the shanty and putting on my high tops when the day was over. It felt OK I guess, but one morning I found a large order of French fries in my boots, so that came to an end.

I also loved going to the bathroom and adding to the super cool graffiti that donned the walls. Here are a few I remember reading: “Everybody pees on the floor, be a hero and shit on the ceiling,” “Here I sit broken hearted tried to shit but only farted,” and then my personal favorite, “Fart loud if you love Jesus.” Some guys hated to use the crapper at work, but not me. I went two or three times a day. “Cause I’m a wanderer, yeah I’m a wanderer, I roam around around around around.” (“The Wanderer” by Dion and the Belmonts, 1959)

## Shocks in My Boots ...

My work boots are equipped with Electrical Hazard Protection, and according to the American National Standards Institute, they also provide protection from open circuits. Another great feature of my boots is their rubber soles. Timberland uses a heat resistant, durable, specially made rubber compound to offer improved slip resistance, abrasion resistance, and oil resistance. The end result is better traction on all surfaces. The rubber soles allow me to be grounded at all times, giving me some peace of mind when working with voltage strong enough to kill a large elephant in an instant.

“We have no means of knowing whether a man who has been killed by electricity was killed instantly or not, or painlessly. We don’t know how it kills; we simply know that the man is dead.” (P.230, Simon) Having been an electrician for almost ten years, I’ve had my share of shocks, and I can say that no two shocks are ever the same.

I became an apprentice in Local Three in 1999. In fact, it was September 9, 1999 (9/9/99). I remember working that year with a man named Herman, an old timer from Brooklyn. Herman was a great electrician and an even better teacher. What I remember most about working with Herman is when he preached to me that I should “respect electricity and not fear it.” He told me that if I thought I’d go my whole career without getting shocked, that I had another thing coming.

One day Herman was working on a live circuit and it happened to be high voltage. Normally we don’t work on anything live, but in this case, there wasn’t much of a choice. Anyhow, Herman climbed up a six-foot ladder and asked me to stand behind him with a two-by-four plank of wood in case he got “hung up,” in which case, I was supposed to whack him off the ladder with all my might using the plank. Yikes! Luckily, nothing happened to ol’ Herman, and he was able to walk back down the ladder unscathed. I’ve heard so many stories from fellow electricians about getting jolts of electricity, and it’s never pretty.

I do have a dangerous job, and electricity is something to be taken seriously. The electric chair is a means of death, proving to the world how dangerously serious and deadly a shock can be. When friends or family ask me to hang a fan for them, I sometimes hear “I can do it, but I don’t want to get fried.” That term “fried” has to have come

from the days of the electric chair. I like it because it instills fear and respect in the minds of potential clients. In my opinion, this fear puts food on the table for electricians around the world.

### **Taking Them Off ...**

Since 1999, I've had to buy several pairs of work boots. I am proud to say, though, when I retire a pair of boots, they are **WORN OUT**. I always feel like I got my hundred bucks worth and then some. A lot of people, especially here in stylish New York, spend their day trying to avoid damage to their precious footwear. When their shoes get so much as a scuff, they drop ten bucks on a shine. In a few months, **MAYBE** a year, those gently worn shoes are discarded like egg shells and day-old news papers. Not my boots. Each new scuff, scrape and stain was anticipated and welcomed. When I buy a new pair, it is because I cannot walk another step in the old pair. They are ripped and worn out, and it is clear just from looking at them that their owner, me, worked his ass off in them. I love that they vouch for my work ethic before I even need to say a word in my favor.

It is a quintessential vignette of American culture: the man walking in the house from a hard day's work and gratefully taking off his shoes so he can relax. It's a scene I live five days a week. As much as I love my work and my boots, the best part about them is how sweet it feels to take them off at the end of the day.

# One Hundred Stories Building

**Jesse Plenderleith**

It is about three o'clock in the afternoon and my brother and I are just about halfway over the Whitestone Bridge heading towards Connecticut. The ride is reasonably quiet and will stay that way for a while. Only subtle sounds that are almost part of the silence will help us pass the time on this long trip aside from the usual banter that my brother and I get into with the house techno music my brother listens to playing in the background. There's almost a guarantee that there will be no discussion about why we are taking this trip. What awaits us is the chance to pay our last respects to our uncle and fellow Local Union Three electrician, George Bowen.

My uncle retired years before from the electrical industry but he never stopped working, whether he was working in his wood shop, with electricity, or with his gun collection. His hands were forever in use. My brother and I are the first to arrive at the funeral home, with my dad and mom not far behind. We wait for the memories, we wait for the tears, and we wait for the stories of a good electrician and a great man. I wonder what people will say at my passing, what types of memories they will have of me and which stories will they tell.

The head of the funeral home shows us to a gathering of couches and chairs in the waiting area outside the room where my uncle is to be viewed. Shortly after, we are directed into the viewing room. Slowly the room becomes filled with emotion. There is sadness at the loss of a loved one and friend, but also laughter brought on by the funny stories many of his club members and coworkers tell. "George was a great man with simple needs and who had a great family" is how many describe him. "He was a man who loved working with his hands and loved wearing his flannel."

The more I listen, the more I learn and remember about my uncle. All the stories of these quaint encounters from people who knew him personally or who met him coincidentally paint a vivid picture that I recognize as George Bowen: uncle, father, friend, husband, brother, and Local Three brother.

"So Jesse, what are you up to these days?" inquires one of my cousins. "Your dad tells me you're in the local?" I respond proudly that I am, and that I am just starting my second year. He is familiar

with the local because of also his own dad and sees that as a career of respect. His pride when he reminds me that his father was in the local lifts his spirits as it does mine. Whenever anyone else asks me what I do, I still take pride in saying that I'm an electrician. Some people outside the field might look at it as a safe income or like any other construction job, but no one in this room will look down upon my profession. It is men like my father and my uncle who bring about that sense of pride I get for working a day's work. For the remainder of the night, I stay quiet and just listen as everyone else shares their stories.

\* \* \*

*“In rusted shell and marble tower, individual workers banter, blabber, and ballyhoo. Speech at work consists of meandering gossip, barked command, sullen retort, cheerful wit, mournful plea, and self-contained stories.”<sup>1</sup>*

When you are an apprentice, you learn to listen. You listen for proper instructions from your mechanic, your straw, your foreman, and anyone else who is your superior on the job. You listen for any emergency warnings: the blast of an air horn three consecutive times to herald an evacuation, the yells of “LOOK OUT!!!” or “Watch that, Watch That, WATCH THAT!!!” You listen also for the lack of noise, which is a clue that something may be seriously wrong. Maybe fumes, smoke, or fire caused everyone to evacuate, or just as urgently, it might be lunch time or time to pack up and go home. You listen for any signs of urgency whatever they may be. You listen to the hearsay, the gossip, and the shop talk. And of course, you listen to the stories of the men and women you work with, your friends and others you might not like so much. They all have stories: the self-inflating account and the ego-stroking fable and the ‘beyond believable from four lines in’ escapades. If you are there to hear, you will be obliged to listen. When you are an apprentice you also learn to not listen.

\* \* \*

*“These latter narratives, under varied tags (“tale,” “legend,” “myth,” “saga,” “parable,” “drollery,” “joke,” “whopper,” “windie,” “anecdote”), roll from assembly line to shopping mall, hospital corridor to harbor dock, public bureau to runaway plant.”<sup>2</sup>*

There is this one guy [let's call him Tony] who loved to hear himself talk. He was a good electrician and knew a lot about how to do a lot of things. Unfortunately not one of those things was the ability to keep quiet. From the time the shanty door was opened in the wee hours of the morning before work straight through coffee break, through lunch, and right on through to the minute the shanty was locked up, the air was filled with chatter. Whatever the topic or subject, Tony had something to say about everything from his own "personal experience," or he knew someone who did that, knew that, or whatevered that. If you worked somewhere, he worked there. If you knew someone, he was their best friend. He was the guy who always had to have an answer even when he might not fully comprehend the discussion you and someone else were having.

In his stories, Tony was always the quiet wise man who no one listened to. He once told this story about an experience he had on a job site that was being "visited" by Coalition members. He didn't go much into the sordid history of the Coalition, just that they would show up on job sites and force their way into a pay check. They'd do the jobs of laborers and carpenters and the like. While Tony was working on some voltage testing, a Coalition member looked over his shoulder trying to see if he could take Tony's job as well. After Tony warned him about what 2400 volts coursing through the body might feel like, the Coalition member decided that electricity was better left to the trained electricians. With his job saved, Tony went about his work to tell stories and keep everyone's ears busy.

Tony was also a good listener when one could get a word in edgewise. For a man with the gift of gab, it was hilarious to me when his suggestions for a better way to do something would fall on the deaf ears of a foreman who didn't want to hear anything other than "Right away, boss." Like the boy who cried "wolf," Tony told too many stories and people got tired of listening to him. Yet Tony often turned out to be right. Listen to me said the wise man, and the wisest men listened.

\* \* \*

*"Briody kept to himself as they ate and bantered."*

"Maybe you should talk more at break, socialize with the guys. Instead of eating your lunch in the park, you might want to think about sitting in the shanty and talking with the crew," the straw advises

the quiet apprentice. I'm not big on talking when I have nothing to say. And I don't talk shop, I don't watch much sports, and some guys know everything and everyone. It is work to put up with some of those earwigs. Don't get me wrong, sometimes there is plenty of amusement to be found as I try to chronicle the verbal diarrhea that is unleashed by some of my fellow workers who like nothing but the sound of their own voice. Astonishment could be the perfect word for when someone can talk and talk and talk and never actually say anything.

I might talk more if I didn't love silence so much.

\* \* \*

Have you ever worked with this one guy, I can't remember his real name, but everyone called him "Alphabet" because he had almost every letter at least once in his last name? Now he was a character, always screaming at the top of his lungs for no apparent reason and not necessarily at anyone in particular. Good guy, good electrician. But man was he a whack-a-do. I worked with him at a high school and we were partnered up to run some pipe into the electrical closet. Well, the summer had arrived and so did the sweltering heat. The upper floors would get unbearably hot, reaching up to 110 degrees, and Alphabet wasn't one for the heat. So on the empty side of an occupied school he strips down to his boxers, undershirt, and tool belt. He worked like that for a good hour until one of the school security guards, this tiny little Latin thing about five feet tall and no more than ninety pounds, started yelling at him to put on his pants. Now it wasn't like Alphabet was an exhibitionist or a pedophile, he just hated being hot and sweaty.

\* \* \*

On a jobsite we have a seasoned mechanic and an apprentice right out of high school. The day is meandering down and the time has come to wrap up. The mechanic tells the apprentice to gather up the ladders and lock them up. The apprentice disputes this somewhat and asks the mechanic why he has to get both ladders since they used a ladder each. What follows is a mutual tiff or rather just another reason for the two of them to complain.

The mechanic tells a story to the disrespectful apprentice who doesn't know his place. He talks about when he was an apprentice and had to wrestle heavy tools for his mechanic. His actions were

both a sign of respect and payment for what his mechanic taught him that day. Back in the day, apprentices would do whatever was asked of them so they could learn everything that there is to learn. The mechanic mourns for the days when an apprentice would ask nothing but questions about how things work.

Meanwhile, the apprentice is weaving a story of his own. He tells of the lazy mechanic who doesn't do anything but make his apprentice (him) carry out menial chores. He complains that he isn't learning anything but how to rack ladders. He hasn't even reached his two-month mark as an electrical apprentice and is thirsty for knowledge. The apprentice's cry for understanding falls on the ears of men and women who have heard this story before if not told it themselves.

Both versions of the story are told to all who would hear with the exception of one other. The mechanic expresses his dissatisfaction to like-minded mechanics, while the apprentice tries to conjure sympathy from fellow apprentices. If they would just communicate their versions of the story to one another, they might get something done. Instead, the mechanic and apprentice continue to misunderstand one another and bicker back and forth to the dismay of all in ear shot.

\* \* \*

*“ ... And John Henry said to his captain, said ‘A man is nothing but a man, but you can bring that stream drill around and I’ll beat it fair and honest. I’ll die with a hammer in my hand, but I’ll be laughing, cause you can’t replace a steel driving man’ ... ”*

Johnny Cash's *The Legend of John Henry's Hammer* is the tale of a man who was brought up to be a hard worker, beat a machine, and died a hard worker. John Henry was a man who worked and worked and worked some more. He had a job to do and finished it. He is the iconic hard worker, working until the very end. Men like him are men in the fullest meaning of the word in the stories that they leave behind. These men never really die. They become legends. In the end, John Henry told his love to go to his boss and repeat to him his last words, “I could hoist a jack and I could lay a track, I could pick and shovel too, ain't no machine can, that's been proved to you.” Men like John Henry are never mourned; they are turned to myths.

\* \* \*

*Arcing or sparking occurs when high-amperage currents jump from one conductor to another through air, generally during opening or closing circuits, or when static electricity is discharged. Fire may occur if the arcing takes place in an atmosphere that contains an explosive mixture. Also, the arc could start other flammable material on fire.*<sup>3</sup>

There are hundreds of stories that electricians tell, but there are only a few accounts of such dread and magnitude as the stories of someone being consumed by an arc of electricity. We are warned about arcing but no one is truly prepared for such a shock. Not the actual electrical shock, mind you, but the reaction after a gigantic fireball has made a burnt remnant of whomever was in front of the blast. There is no funny ending or anecdote in a story involving an arc blast. The ending is either serious injury or death. And the worst part is that arc stories aren't a cautionary tale because even if all precautions are taken, an arc is still dangerous. The stories that are left are just remembrances of a horrific accident.

\* \* \*

*"The day your grandfather dies ..."*<sup>4</sup>

The job is never completely finished until the worker can no longer work. I know a few stories about men who only took their final rest after they had finished the work that they needed to get done. Something in the back of their minds told them that there would be no tomorrow to reschedule and no further time for procrastination. They were like the ancient messengers who ran hundreds of miles to deliver a letter, and once the message was in the hands of its recipient, they fell to the ground from exhaustion and never got up again. And then there was the man who finally finished cleaning out his attic after his wife had asked him to take care of all the items too heavy for her to carry. He finished his task, made a few phone calls, and passed on as he napped on his lazy boy. My uncle was one of these men.

\* \* \*

*"And so it was left to electricity – variously called electromorsis, electricide, electricission, electrostrike, or ampermort ..."*<sup>5</sup>

Electrocution is to be injured or killed by electric shock. You can call it electromorsis, or ampermort, or (my personal favorite) electricide, but a rose by any other name is still a rose; and electrocution by any other name is just another way to say that someone has been cooked from the insides out. Electricians (as well as some other curious people) have all felt the sensation of electrocution in some small way or another. We tend to try and lessen the seriousness of being electrocuted by simply stating “Crap! I just got hit” or “The wire bit me,” but the more fatal encounters with electricity are still called electrocutions. And not even someone who has the blackest of gallows humor would make light of such a death.

There are plenty of statistics to tell you that exposure to electricity is still a major cause of death among construction workers. And as electricians, we choose to ignore these facts and work with such potential danger. Worst still is the fact that among electricians, the most serious concern is working “live” or near live wires. This is something no one should do. The union doesn’t want anyone, especially apprentices, to work anywhere near anything live because it wants everyone to go home safely at the end of the day. The failure to avoid working with live wires and an apparent lack of, or disregard for, basic electrical safety are the major contributors to death by electrocution.

\* \* \*

Yeah, I worked for the man. He wasn’t a dick to me. Everyone kept telling me how awful a foreman he was. They’d warn you how much he would scream and how much of a hardass he was, yet I never saw it. That’s because I don’t take any shit. The first time I set foot on a job he was running, everyone was nervous when he was around. They also warned me about his walleye, and I couldn’t care less. But when he gave me my job to do for the day, the walleye was pretty hard not to notice. He was pointing everything out, and I kept looking behind me. He pointed at another thing, and I checked behind me. He showed me how he wanted this or that, and I turned my head again. He got a little annoyed and asked, “What the hell are you looking at?”

And I said, “I don’t know if you’re talking to me or someone behind me.” He started to giggle and never bothered me. Me and him are buddy-buddy.

\* \* \*

*“ ... all were concerned less with electricity’s potential to insure eternal life than with its likelihood to cause imminent death.”<sup>6</sup>*

One of the first things that I was told during my first few weeks as an electrician was that electricity could kill me at any given moment. It was always very seriously stated: “Electrocution hurts and can be a very painful way to die.” Why didn’t they tell me this before I got into this business? It could work as a deterrent, like in the ten-hour safety class you take before they give you a driver’s license when they show you the movie of road dangers that scares you from even walking on the street – let alone driving – out of fear of drunk drivers. They tell apprentices that they could never or should never ever work on anything that is energized. Yet some electricians do work “live” instead of de-energizing and using lockout/tag-out procedures. There is always a feeling in the back of my thoughts that while I’m working, I could be barreled down by the drunk driver that is electricity.

\* \* \*

*“He wondered what her story was. That was the thing about this city. Everyone, it seems, was from someplace else, everyone had a story.”<sup>7</sup>*

Whether it is on my way to and from work, on the morning venture to the deli to retrieve that day’s coffee order for the crew or just wandering the streets on my lunch break, I like to watch people. The city is one of the best places to people watch, and New York City has a lot of people. Every face has a story to tell. Where they are coming from, where they are going to. There are as many stories that could be told as there are building stories that populate the skyline of Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs. I walk around and try to tell my own stories of the lives lived by those I pass. The sensible business woman who has running sneakers on; she might be on her way to rock climb in Central Park. The dusty construction worker who stands with his triceps straining under the pressure of trying to keep from falling as the train makes its oh-so-pleasant jolt of a stop; he might be returning from a dance studio where he has taken up ballet. I have absolutely no idea where these people are coming from or going to, but the stories that they might be able to tell interest me endlessly.

I often sit across from the people I work with and imagine the stories that they might have. As I sit in the shanty at the coffee ring-stained table piled with newspapers and condiments, and I wonder how they got here. What roads did these men and women travel to be in this position in life? Was being an electrician their first option or last choice? The men and women I work with have plenty of stories of their own, from the journey woman who sees this as an opportunity to show that women can survive in a male-dominated industry, to the apprentice who had no where else to go but into an industry that fed his father and father's father for decades. They could tell all these tales until they are blue in the face, but it is their true stories that interest me the most.

To know the person who looks directly at you during the twenty minute coffee break can never really happen because like those people on the subway, they are in the same car with you until the train gets to their stop, and then they are gone to their next destination.

\* \* \*

*“I’d be with him (Harry Van Arsdale) and he’d go over and he’d start to chat with someone. I’d say to myself, “Why is he bothering with that person?” I mean he’d be talking to the waiter at some affairs. And sincerely. You know he wasn’t conning him. He wasn’t looking for a bigger cut of steak or something. He was just interested in the person.”<sup>8</sup>*

My mother tells this little story of her own experience with Harry, which involves my brother who was much too small to remember it himself. She recalls when my brother was no more than a year-and-a-half old or so, he was playing in the grass between the buildings that make up our block of Elechester. He was running around or playing tag when Harry Van Arsdale himself walked up one of the many paths and stood watching for less than a minute. He turned to my mother, gave her a pleasant greeting, and pointed to my brother with a smile. “This is the future of America, he is the future of our industry,” he said.

The man that was responsible for building this community and who was one of the most important figures in the labor movement talked about my brother and seemingly prophesied what would happen. This is an encounter that struck such a chord that my mother remembers this brief moment to this day. Initially she didn’t even

know who this man was, but he had such a presence and his kindness shone through, so it didn't matter. She had recognized him from going to union meetings with my father, but she didn't know exactly who he was until later.

What she knew was that this man who walked around the neighborhood with two large men behind him was an important part of the union that my father was a member of, and she also knew that his words would become reality as my brother would go through an apprenticeship and come out a mechanic, fulfilling the prophecy of the man who created Elechester and helped pave the way for the union in New York. My brother was the future as he came through the apprenticeship program, and in the same way I too am the future as I go through the same program now.

\* \* \*

As the red, white, and blue balloons are released into the Connecticut sky to represent my uncle's ascension into the heavens I stand alongside my brother and parents. Everyone at the burial sends their love with a balloon to a man who will become legendary in the words of those who knew him. Everyone is asked to say their final prayers. As we walk back to the car, I notice that there are other electricians laid to rest in this cemetery. I notice this and take comfort in that fact.

On the long ride back to Queens, I have plenty of opportunity to reflect on all the stories that I heard the previous night and how they fill in gaps of his life that I didn't see until shown. My uncle was a good electrician and a great man, and he will live on through the stories that people have of him, of the good electrician and the loving husband and the caring father and the understanding friend and the great man.

My uncle in his fashion was not laid to rest that day wearing a three-piece suit or a pricey dress shirt, but he went wearing one of his favorite flannel shirts. Everyone said that it just wouldn't be George any other way.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Green Archie. *Calf's Head and Union Tale: Labor Yarns at Work and Play*: University Press, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Green, Archie. *Calf's Head and Union Tale*, pg. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Keller, J.J. *Official OSHA Construction Safety Handbook*. New York: J.J. Keller and Associates, Inc., 2005, pg. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> DeSalvo, Louise. 'Mbriago- Gutkind, Lee. *The Best Creative Nonfiction Vol. 1*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007, pg. 39.
- <sup>5</sup> Simon, Linda. *Dark Light*, pg. 223.
- <sup>6</sup> Simon, Linda. *Dark Light*, pg. 223.
- <sup>7</sup> Kelly, Thomas. *Empire Rising*, pg. 34.
- <sup>8</sup> Ruffini, Gene. *Harry Van Arsdale, Jr: Labor's Champion*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002.

# Every Mechanic Has a Rule

Adam Lopez

## What Can I Get For You Today?

Coffee time is an important time of the day, and this is especially true for you, the apprentice who does the coffee run. Right off the bat, you have ahead of you a number of tasks that need to be done in order to successfully complete the coffee run. You also have a lot of mechanics and their different opinions as to the way you should go about the coffee run.

### **“Put the Coffee Order In After You Have Gotten the Food”**

A mechanic I had named John was the craziest when it came to coffee. The first thing he would say to me after good morning was, “Order the coffee after the food, kid.” It was unbelievable how he would say that almost every morning.

As an apprentice, the easiest way to get yelled at is to bring a mechanic cold coffee. To do so almost certainly guarantees you another trip to wherever it is you get the coffee, which itself is bad and is only made worse when you realize that you could be drinking your own coffee instead of running out to get someone else’s. Over time I have come to understand John’s rule to be one of the more significant rules an apprentice can have and since I have adhered to it, coffee break has been less stressful, and my coffee time has remained my coffee time.

As a matter of fact, he also had a rule about giving him back his change. He made it clear that coffee time was the men’s time and that the change should be given back on company time. There was one instance when I gave him back his change before the coffee break was over, and for a week after that he refused to give me a coffee order. I did get the point and from then on I made it my business to give him his change when he wanted it. It’s a win-win if you think about it. It took no more effort to do what he asked, and he was happy because his coffee was hot.

## **“I Want My Change Back Immediately”**

Another mechanic named Anthony always demanded that he get his change immediately after he got his coffee. His change and his coffee order really needed to be given to him at the same time or else I'd hear something bad come out of his mouth. Why he was so adamant about getting his change back so quickly I could never figure out, but what I can tell you is that he made the coffee break much more stressful. It was irrelevant to him that I had a dozen or so more mechanics waiting on me to deliver their food. The only thing that mattered to him was getting his food and getting his money, even if that meant making everyone else wait for their food, which was often the case. While this sometimes caused problems between me and the other mechanics, there wasn't much I could do about it. You're not going to please everyone all the time and once you realize that, the drama brought to you by the mechanics really isn't that stressful and often is actually quite entertaining.

## **Get Back With the Coffee When Coffee Break Starts**

Coffee also has to be back when it's supposed to be back. Coming late with coffee will net you a zero percent fan base amongst the crew. Every mechanic wants to have their coffee when they're supposed to have it, and most of them consider bringing the coffee hot and on time to be the single most important job of the apprentice's day. I had a mechanic give me a five spot every day that I came in with the coffee at 9 a.m. on the dot. His name was also Anthony and you better believe that I got those five dollars every single day. All I had to do was get there a little early and wait until 9 to go in. As an apprentice, you need to find out or devise a system that works for you. Trial and error will help make you aware of what works and what doesn't. Always give yourself enough time to accomplish your tasks. Failure to do so will eventually cause you to rush, and that's when mistakes are made.

## **Clean Up After Your Mechanics**

I worked with a mechanic who everyone referred to as the Pistol. Pistol was a young A journeyman who had just turned out only seven months prior. He was a man with his head so far up his own ass it was ridiculous. Pistol was always the best mechanic on the job site; he was never late, he was never wrong, and anything you could do, he could do better. That was Pistol all day every day. My reason for making that comment stems solely from my disgust about his mindset

towards the apprentices, and more specifically from his notion that it was the apprentice's job to clean up after his mechanics, especially after the coffee break and lunch break. There was this one occasion where he was eating next to me, and when he finished he looked at me and said, "Take care of this, will ya." I laughed because I assumed he was just saying something funny, but to my surprise he was actually very serious.

This led to a momentary standoff because the fact of the matter was that I was not going to be throwing away his garbage or anyone else's garbage for that matter, and I respectfully told him this straight up, which he wasn't too thrilled about. Situations such as this one are fickle and can often lead you down a path where you don't want to go. Like it or not, there is an order in operations and a right and wrong way to go about them.

I'm a firm believer that by giving respect you get it back, so my response to Pistol was a respectful one spoken with a stern attitude. Not only did he not get mad, but at the end of lunch he threw away his garbage as well as mine. Had I chosen a more derogatory approach (which sadly happens to be the more commonly used) and told him to go fuck himself, I would have failed to resolve the garbage issue and very well may have created a another issue altogether. It is definitely not your job as an apprentice to put anyone else's garbage in the trash, and any mechanic who tells you differently is taking you for a ride simply because you don't know any better.

### **"Ask Me Questions"**

Another mechanic, an old timer named Perry LaCore, was one of the best mechanics I ever worked with. Here was a mechanic whose rule for the apprentice was, "Ask questions." That was it in a nutshell. I was lucky enough to be paired up with him for a few weeks, but I would be lying if I said they were easy. For every question I asked him, two questions were asked of me, and I swear all his questions were exam worthy. That's really what it felt like. I felt like I was taking a test every time that I worked with him.

Perry by himself is responsible for a good portion of the knowledge I acquired during my apprenticeship. Although it wasn't easy doing all the work, I knew at the end of the day that I was getting the better of the deal, and that is the way you as an apprentice need to look at it. Mechanics like Perry are quite rare, and if you are fortunate enough to work with a mechanic like him, pick his brain, ask him questions,

and do all these things in a positive, respectful manner. If you put in the effort, the only rational outcome is positive, and that's really what it's all about.

### **“Don't Ask Anything, Just Do What You're Told”**

What do you do when you are teamed up with a mechanic who is the complete opposite of Perry? I was once partnered up with a mechanic for what seemed like forever, although it was only two weeks. His name was Chris, and in his world, the apprentice was there to do just what Chris said and nothing else. His rule for me was very simple: I was to never ask him anything or question anything that he did, was doing, or was going to do. Also, I was to complete all the tasks that he gave me in the order that he gave them, and I was to do this in a timely fashion.

In my opinion, Chris was the kind of mechanic who shouldn't be in the business. His attitude towards me and the other apprentices was out-of-this-world nasty, and he really did make those two weeks hell.

As an apprentice, you are certainly going to come across someone like Chris, and when you do, you have to make sure that your head is in the game or else you're going to find yourself between a very big rock and a hard place. I hated working with this guy, but even though I didn't have a choice about who I could work with, I did have a choice on how I could work with him. I decided that I was going to “yes” him to death and do everything that he wanted. Sure I was mad about it, and sure I wanted to kick his face in, but to achieve the goal of becoming an A journeyman, you have to complete the apprentice program. If I had broken his face, I'm sure you wouldn't be reading my stories now.

The apprenticeship, like other jobs, is a game and the better you are at the game, the more likely you are to come out on top. Mechanics like Chris are assholes, and the best thing you can do is to not return the favor by being one back. You don't want to burn any bridges in this business because it really is a small business. You will run into the same shitty mechanic again, and maybe the next time, he'll be your foreman. If you took the high road the first time, maybe he will remember that and do right by you. If you decided to be just as much of an ass as he was, he will definitely remember. In this case, your best bet would be to get laid off because working under him will be hell.

## Always Carry Your Hand Tools

Wayne Cochrane's firm belief that an apprentice should always carry his hand tools was one of the first rules that I was taught by any mechanic. It was around the third month of my Local Three apprenticeship when Wayne told me this, and although he wasn't the first mechanic to say it, he's the mechanic who comes to mind whenever I think about hand tools. In my opinion, this is a rule that most mechanics give to an apprentice when they want to break the apprentice's balls.

The hand tools of the electrician are pliers, screwdrivers, channel locks, a level, and a six-foot wooden ruler. As an apprentice, having your hand tools means that you are ready to deal with almost any situation on the job site. The fact that you are carrying your tools sends a message to the mechanics, and more importantly the foreman, that you are ready, willing, and able to work.

But as the apprentice, you will never be working with all of your tools. Other responsibilities will fall under your jurisdiction due to the fact that you are the least paid man or woman on the job. It makes sense from an economical stand point for the least-paid person to do the grunt work, and that's just the way it is. Even if you're partnered up and are in the middle of a task, if you are asked to take a delivery or get materials, that becomes your priority job. In this case, common sense tells you that you don't need to carry all of your tools if you are on material detail or if you are taking a delivery or doing anything else that doesn't require tools.

Anyone who has any common sense would agree with that notion, but not anyone named Wayne Cochrane. He had a presence about him that would make people pause when he would walk into a room, and yet what I remember most about him is all the hundreds of times he would ask me where my tools were. It was never worth debating because I was never going to win, and I learned the first time not to ignore him because ignoring him didn't work. The rule that an apprentice should always carry tools is one I'm torn about. It certainly has its pros as well as its cons. In the end, it comes down to how you wish to be perceived as an apprentice by the mechanics and supervisors.

## Measure Twice and Cut Once

At the very beginning of your apprenticeship, there's one rule that you will most likely hear from several different mechanics before your first week is up. The words sound simple and to the point because, well, they are. "Measure twice and cut once" is exactly how they put it. As luck would have it, that advice came into play as soon as I got it because at the job we were running all kinds of conduit, or as I say, pipe. It's not politically correct to say "pipe," but that just so happens to be what comes out of my mouth when I'm referring to conduit. During my first two years, I worked for Five Star, and the site I was on was a new construction of a subway station in downtown Manhattan by the Staten Island Ferry. The only thing going on was pipe runs and because of that, I became the number one advocate for measuring twice and cutting once.

Not only was this job site massive, it was also underground, and to top it off we were running galvanized pipe ranging from three quarters of an inch to four inches. We worked on three levels with over 70 steps from the top of the yard to the track level. Because of that, measuring twice and cutting once was actually the only logical thing to do. Measuring twice and perhaps even three times is what you must do with big pipes of one and a half inches or more, because the margin for error is close to zero. Making a miscalculation meant that you carried that 150 pounds of four inch pipe to the threader, cut and threaded the pipe, took it out and carried it to the hydraulic bender, set it up the way you wanted it, bent the pipe, took it out, and then carried it to your work area all for nothing.

Measurement mistakes on big pipes are more serious than those on smaller pipes, but that is not to say that measuring twice is unnecessary with smaller pipes. The difference between someone who is a great pipe bender and a so-so pipe bender can be measured by both how many adjustments he or she has to make to the pipe after finishing the bending and by the amount of pipe he or she wastes. As an apprentice who is working on a job site running pipe, the rule that you should measure twice and cut once should make up the foundation for your learning. It's a golden rule that when implemented consistently will become second nature and improve your status as an apprentice as well as an electrician. As far as I am concerned, there is no downside to measuring twice, and every mechanic will tell you the same.

Unless, of course, you ask a short, fat mechanic whom I will call Bob.

## **“Just Put It Up”**

Bob was a real nice guy with a good sense of humor and an all-around great mechanic to work with if you weren't running pipe, that is. It was apparent to me that here was a guy who hadn't been taught the golden rule, which meant that he didn't go through the apprenticeship program and was organized from a non-union shop. His rule for me was “get it up,” “it” referring to the pipe and “up” referring to where it needed to go.

Working on pipe runs with Bob was a nightmare. He hardly ever took measurements and would make all of his bends, offsets, kicks, and saddles by eye. His reasoning for not measuring twice, or even once for that matter, was that it took too long. By the time I took out my wooden rule and made a measurement and checked it again, he would be on his way back from making up the pipe saying something smart like, “Are you sure you got it right?” or “Are you still measuring that one piece?” I couldn't understand his logic because eight out of ten times, he would need to go back and re-cut and thread his pipe or start over entirely, which took significantly more time than my multiple measurements.

Bob however wasn't trying to hear that and would get on my case when I would attempt to measure something. He was always in a rush and would literally take my wooden ruler from me after my initial measurement.

I will admit that taking a rough measurement in some instances is okay and can even at times be more efficient, but certainly not often enough to ignore the golden rule of conduit bending. Being an apprentice, you lack the experience needed to execute rough measurements with precision, and because of that, you should never forget the golden rule of conduit installation. If a mechanic insists that you make rough measurements and rough cuts, as mine did, then do as he or she asks. You can always learn something even by doing everything wrong. So if nothing else, you will learn a method of running pipe that you shouldn't use, which should help strengthen your commitment to the method that is the golden rule for pipe installation.

## **“Anticipate My Next Move”**

Kenneth Johnson and I were partners for almost two months and throughout that time, I was expected to do only one thing at all times. That one thing, I immediately found out, was in actuality a constant flow of things. Kenny told me that all I had to do was anticipate his

next move. As simple as that sounded, I knew that while I was working with Kenny it wasn't going to be easy, because Kenny was not like any other mechanic I have worked with.

Kenny, in my opinion, was someone who defied the norm. He was 50 years old, a real deal from the streets, a hood dude who had walked the walk, still talked the talk, and who backed it up by working like he was still 20.

Kenny was always the first one to blow up about any little thing I did wrong and make a scene, and the first couple times that he did this, I was unsure how to feel. It took me a little time to realize that this was his way of teaching me to teach myself. He would often ask me after he was done with his drama, "What did you learn?" The beauty of this question was that I usually did know the answer despite it being different every single time.

I had never, until then, worked with someone who had as much energy as I had throughout the entire course of the day. The man wore me out every day, but I never allowed myself to be shown up by him. Had I slacked for even a moment, I would never have heard the end of it, and so I followed his one rule eight hours a day, five days a week, for weeks.

Anticipating your mechanic's next move is very difficult, but it is also the best thing you can do, and when you break it down, you will see that it is a win-win for everyone. By staying one step ahead of your mechanic, you're keeping your head in the game and that's the key to getting all that you can out of the five years you're an apprentice. Staying a step ahead of your mechanic will push your skills to the limit, forcing you to think faster and work more efficiently. Subconsciously, your level of awareness on the job and about your daily tasks will increase. You will simply become a better electrician.

There is no question that you will have a hard day's work staying ahead of your mechanic. Never will it be easy, and significant are the amount of times you will want to say fuck it, fuck you, fuck off, and you can kiss my ass, but you can't. A big part of this job is not so much following the rules but how you go about following the rules.

# The Dreaded Coffee Run

Karl Heyerman

**M**y work as an electrician is more diversified than you might think. In fact, it is more diversified than I had originally thought. We electricians don't just put in duplex receptacles, circuit breakers, and switches. There is much more to our trade; for example, we have to be knowledgeable about other tradework such as carpentry because it affects us on a daily basis. Our job is easier if we can spot a possible problem between what we electricians are doing and what other tradespeople are doing. We're not just connecting wires, but we also need to be creative. One of the apprentice technician tasks since the inception of construction has been and remains ...

## Taking the Coffee Order

Taking a coffee order is a chore in itself. You think it's simple, it should be, but I'll be in the middle of running BX cable through the ceiling when I have to stop and start taking everyone's coffee order. Even worse, I might be in the middle of learning something from my journeyman, and the need to start taking coffee orders makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up because it's interfering with my learning on the job. I basically drop everything search for the guys to get their orders. John is the first person I encounter.

"Anything for coffee, John?" I say.

"No thank you," he replies as usual, but the day I cannot find him and just assume that he doesn't want anything will be the day when he will want something.

I search for another guy and come across Bob, who nine times out ten needs my assistance to passing him pliers or hold on to something. He is one of those guys who could do it himself but just because you're there, he'll use you.

"So, what can I get you for coffee?" I ask.

"I want ..." and then he usually thinks about it and voices his thoughts for several minutes. "What should I get ... ?" he wonders, only to be distracted by someone else. After wasting an unreasonable amount of time, he finally he gives me his order and takes another unnecessary amount of time to give me his money. After getting the life

sucked out of me, I go quickly on my way to the next guy before Bob changes his mind. Bob has changed his mind in the past, and you can imagine the pain that causes.

“Kevin!” I shout from across the floor,

“What do you want?” I know what he will order and this is my own inside joke.

“Let me have two scrambled eggs on a roll with turkey sausage.”

The joke is that one day the cook put on regular sausage links instead of flat turkey sausage on Kevin’s roll, and ever since then that day, Kevin couldn’t be happier. He tells the other guys how lean and delicious this “turkey” sausage is over the “fatty regular sausage.” In fact, he’s even got two other guys ordering it. I can’t say anything about it now because the joke has gone too far, and if I told them what they are really eating, they’d complain about how disgusting it is and why didn’t I make sure the order was right. Believe me, these guys love to rub salt in the wound.

## The Deli Runs

The deli run is sometimes a much needed time away from the job and co-workers, but at other times I feel I am missing important information that could be valuable to me in the future. As I make my way outside from down in the dungeon where there are no windows, I see that the sun is shining, and it looks like a beautiful day. On my way to the deli with my cardboard list, I admire all the different types of people and their styles. I take a well-deserved stroll, taking the longest possible path before arriving at the deli. Usually at every job I bring my camera to take pictures of the building I’m working in and maybe of a few others around the area. I find many buildings fascinating in how differently they are created.

One time last year when I was working at 30 Rockefeller Center, I snapped a few shots of the Christmas tree while on my way for a coffee run, and a family of tourists asked if I could take a picture of them, which turned into a chain reaction. Before I knew it, I was taking many people’s photographs, and fifteen or twenty minutes passed before I made a break for it and got back on track to the deli. This is when I realized that the jacket I had on made me look like a security guard, which is probably why all those people were asking me to take their pictures!

## **Botched-Up Coffee Orders # 1**

Some delis can really screw up the coffee orders, and some places are great. At a deli on 53rd between Seventh Avenue and Broadway, the cook was so good that he should have had his own reality show. The first time I was there, he asked for my order and as soon as I finished, he yelled “Next!” without turning around. The next person gave their order, and this went on several times before someone had to wait. I could not believe my own eyes and ears. There was no way this guy was going to get all these orders correct. Well, from the time I walked in to the time I left, and no one, got the wrong order.

## **Botched Up Coffee Order # 2**

Unfortunately, the deli where I presently go is quite the opposite. Almost every day this cook makes mistakes. The other day he said, “You order grilled cheese, bacon, and ham on a roll every day.”

I said “Yes, but today he wants grilled cheese and tomato on a roll.” I know everyone is not perfect, especially me – maybe I forget something or the cook screws up the order or the cashier simply forgets to bag someone’s egg sandwich. Then when I get back to the job and distribute everyone’s orders in the shanty, boy oh boy, do I hear the complaints.

## **Off Course**

Let’s not forget the really picky electricians who want me to go to the deli for an egg sandwich, to Starbucks for coffee, and then finally to a newsstand for Lotto scratch offs. Unbelievable! These guys really have some nerve, but sometimes I feel bad for them and end up doing it anyway when they ask nicely, even if it causes me to feel that I’m running around like a chicken without a head. This makes my blood start to boil, and I have to take several deep breaths to cool off.

To top it off, some guys have no clue how much things cost, and they’re expecting change when they barely gave me enough money in the first place. For example, Bill wanted a 32 ounce Gatorade and a cup of ice. The Gatorade was \$3.85 and the cup of ice was \$1 - \$4.85 before tax, and he had given me a \$5!!

When I got back and gave out change to everyone except him, his comment was, “I’m glad you’re not my accountant: that is one expensive Gatorade and ice.”

“It sure was, and by the way, \$5 barely gets you a pack of gum these days,” I replied.

I don't understand some of these guys; some think that I'm trying to steal their money.

## **Coming Back With the Goods**

Carrying back everyone's food is challenging, and depending on the number of guys, it can be a balancing act – especially when the deli gives me a cardboard box to carry coffee and sandwiches in the pouring rain. After three blocks, the cardboard gets soaked and starts falling apart. I look like a drowned rat because even if I had an umbrella, there I couldn't hold it and the food at the same time, so I end up running from awning to awning trying to keep dry.

## **Perks**

The good thing about getting coffee is that when I have a big order, I can go to the deli of choice and tell them that I might come there every day. I ask, "How about giving me my order at no charge so you can get the business?" I have not encountered anyone who was unwilling to give me the deal, so at least I get a free breakfast once in awhile.

## **The Return**

When I return from grabbing coffee for the guys, I play a game with the foreman that's like hide and seek. I try to make sure that everyone knows that the coffee has arrived before the foreman finds out, because once he gets his food, the clock starts ticking for the moment when the break is over. I will avoid the foreman until absolutely the very last minute so that we all can have an extended break. Once I was on the forty-eighth floor ready to tell the guys about the coffee when I heard the foreman Danny talking to someone around the corner. Faster than lightning, I ducked down behind a skid of sheetrock as he turned in my direction, and as soon as he passed me by, I ran up the stairs to the 50th floor to inform my coworkers there. I returned the 48th floor just in time because Danny had gone up to the 50th floor behind me. My last stop was at the shanty on the 51st floor where I saw Danny on the stairs at the perfect time.

There have been several times when I wasn't so good at hiding. For instance, one time when I arrived back at the jobsite and was waiting for the freight elevator, the elevator arrived and my foreman stepped out and BAM! I was seen instantly. As he passed me by, I saw him look at his watch.

Then have also been times I have taken care of everyone else but couldn't find the foreman. It can be difficult to find anyone on a multiple floor job and requires climbing any flights of stairs.

If I've found the foreman and the clock for break time has began to tick, I might have trouble finding one last guy. I might have only a few minutes left to devour my breakfast, making my stomach groan from the haste and from knowing that I have limited time to eat because of someone else's lackadaisical attitude.

Heaven forbid that I would sit down and enjoy my breakfast without telling that one last guy about the coffee. Usually he will flip out and ask, "Why didn't you get me?" making me feel guilty just by the tone of his voice. Not everyone is like this, but the guys know what time I take their coffee order and that I'll usually be back within ten minutes. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that they could stick around so I don't have to go on a manhunt. I don't think that this is too much to ask.

## **The Delis of No Return**

After more coffee runs that I can count, the delis that stand out in my memory are the few where I went only once. In the vicinity of Lincoln Center, I walked into a deli and investigated what it did and did not sell. I waited on line and was getting closer when a guy ahead of me grabbed his four or five sandwiches and dropped one on the floor. Not only did the aluminum foil pop open, but the sandwich fell apart and the eggs spilled out on the floor. The guy handed the sandwich back to the cook and told him what happened, and if I hadn't seen what happened next, I wouldn't have believed it. The cook took the same sandwich, tossed it on the grill, and just put it back together. Before he could ask me what I wanted, I left and never returned.

Another "gem" of a deli was over by Rockefeller Center. This deli was actually pretty clean compared to some of the others, and everything looked good as I waited on line: delicious looking food, well dressed workers, and clean floors. As I paid for my order and grabbed the bags, I saw a rat out of the corner of my eye. It ran up the leg of a chair and hopped on to an empty table in the seating area. From the table, the rodent jumped to a shelf towards the back of the deli. I looked down at the bags in my hand and ... went right back to my job. As I walked back, I thanked God that I hadn't ordered anything for myself. I didn't tell anyone, but I also never went back.

## The Demands of the Journeymen

As if journeymen didn't have enough to say about the work on the job, they still have to plenty to say when it comes to coffee. I'm not even out of the building when the demands start. Kenny tells me to be back no later than 9:10 am. He says that because of another apprentice, yet I get the attitude.

"Don't come back before 9 a.m.," someone else says. Once again, this is because of another apprentice, not me. Every time I come back with the food and coffee and haven't even finished handing it out, someone yells out, "Did you get any ketchup?"

"Where's the sugar?" "Is there any salt and pepper?" I'd really appreciate it if they'd wait until they've gotten their food before they start complaining.

### Missing Out # 1

One morning, after working for about an hour and a half, once again I had to stop what I was doing to get the coffee order. I was assisting Joe with the fire alarm at the time, and he had told me to pay attention because if I understand fire alarms, I would be more valuable to a company. He told me that when we went upstairs into the closet, he would show and explain to me all the different panels that are involved.

"If there is ever a fire, this shuts off the air conditioning so that the air won't feed the fire," he told me, but then my time ran out. Not only did I have to leave before he showed me what to do, but when I got back, he had already finished.

### Missing Out # 2

Another missed opportunity involved bending pipe on the cyclone. I was working with my journeyman, Alex, and we were hanging up many lengths of straight pipe with a few bends here and there. He had shown me how easy it was to use the cyclone bender. I was able to bend some ninety degree bends, some forty five degree bends, and even some thirty degree offsets. We had made really good progress that day until we encountered a steel beam that was obstructing our path. I was puzzled and didn't know what to do. Alex told me, "Not to worry, this is not a problem. All we have to do is make a four point saddle." I looked at him with a blank stare ...

“I’ll show you, it’s easier than you think.” But before he could show me, it was time for me to get coffee. When I returned, Alex had already finished with that area and was on to something new. To this day, I still don’t know how to make a four point saddle. Everyone tells me it’s easy and that I won’t have any trouble with it. That’s good to hear, but I still never learned to do it.

## **Rerun**

Going for coffee is a hassle, having to go twice is ridiculous! If it’s my fault, I can understand, but when the cook puts mayonnaise on Charlie’s sandwich and Charlie can’t eat it, he sends me back. “I can’t eat this! I said no mayonnaise! I can’t eat mayonnaise!”

I lost many coffee breaks in similar situations. Another time I got into an argument with Bobby because he accused me of forgetting his cup of ice. The truth was that he thought he told me to get one, but he didn’t. I always write down what each person orders, and a cup of ice was not on the list for him!

## **A Piece of Advice**

In the end, what I have to say about coffee runs to a new apprentice is ... BEWARE! You must stay on top of your game. Don’t let your journeyman convince you into thinking that you messed up their order. Take each order, write it down, and repeat it out loud to whoever placed the order so that there aren’t any questions. Don’t let the pressure get to you. Use your time when you go to get the coffee as a chance to inhale some fresh air and let go of stress or you will go completely insane like me. Earn people’s trust and maybe, just maybe, some of them will give you a tiny bit of respect you deserve.



**By Adrien Morpeau**

## **Intro**

I've put together a group of stories that illustrate a few injuries and ailments that plague construction workers. The following stories do not depict any actual person unless stated otherwise, but I believe the events to be real.

## **Patchwork Face**

The foreman is really pushing the men hard to get a retaining wall finished by the end of the day because they are having unusually nice weather, and it will be too cold in the upcoming days. The men are all pissed because they have to work through their coffee break and possibly lunch, so they are really working fast. They are climbing up and down the scaffold as if they were on fire. This is never a good combination.

To speed up the work, the men working on the ground mix the mortar and cut the cinder blocks to the dimensions they were given. Next, the block and mortar are lifted to the upper levels of the scaffold by an electric forklift. This machine was the cause of a potentially fatal accident. The operator didn't realize the forks were not going to clear the toe board of the scaffold and push the entire board out of place.

This could have been avoided, but in the rush to get the job done, someone forgot to nail the board down. As a result, when the board was nudged by the forklift, it shifted enough to cause the men on the scaffold to lose their balance.

One man was able to grab hold of the scaffold and walk hand over hand to the next secure board, but the other man wasn't so lucky. Both his hands were in use because he was setting a block when the tragedy unfolded. He fell backwards off the scaffold, and trying to grab onto anything he could, he grabbed the bucket forklift, causing the cut blocks and mortar to fall down on top of him. He suffered jagged lacerations all over his body and was rushed to the hospital where he was patched up by plastic surgeons.

Note: In 2008, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) reported that 88 fatalities occurred in the year 2007 from scaffolds and staging. In a Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) study, 72% of workers injured in scaffold accidents attributed the accident either to the planking or support giving way, or to the employee slipping or being struck by a falling object. All of these can be controlled by compliance with OSHA standards.<sup>1</sup>

What could the employee have done to avoid this accident? If he had been wearing his safety harness, the proper PPE (personal protective equipment) for the job, he would have avoided such a tragic accident. We all hate wearing safety glasses, hard hats, and gloves, but it really does save lives and limbs.

## **Lobster**

This story is about a man that I actually worked with. When I first met him in the shanty, he seemed to be a pleasant older gentleman who could retire as soon as he felt like it, and everyone called him "Lobster." He was the kind of guy who loved to teach apprentices because he wasn't worried about losing his job to one of us. As I began to work with this gentleman, I noticed that he had a limp, not like a "stubbed toe" limp, but like a knee replacement gone bad.

After a few days of busting my hump to limit the amount of work that Lobster had to do, the man just sat back and complained about everything I did. "Why would you do that?" "What were you thinking when you did that?" This wasn't constructive criticism, and he was very condescending, so I finally asked my sub foreman to switch me with another person.

I tried to stay as far away from Lobster as possible. During breaks in the shanty, I would sit across the room from him or go outside. What I did begin to notice was that he wore a brace on his leg that went from his ankle to hip. From that point on, I realized that he limped because his brace was fully locked while he walked, causing his strange gait.

This man was one tough S.O.B. to get along with. He took his problems out on everyone at work. If Lobster heard that you were getting married or engaged, he made you feel like you just signed over your soul to the devil. He said that his wife and kids were out to kill him and steal all of his money.

But on the other hand, Lobster was pushing 60 and suffered from severe arthritis, which was the cause of his stiff leg and his need for a brace. I truly believed he only came to work because he couldn't stand to be home. But for a man of his age and in his condition, construction was not really an option. I'm sure many contractors did the right thing and gave him easy tasks when they could afford to, but most of the time he was more of a liability than an asset.

This is the type of future that many of us have in this field, because it is very demanding on the body, and decades of strenuous work can really break the body down. This is why I live by the motto, "Work smarter, not harder." With this attitude, I hope that many of us can retire with the ability to work for pleasure and play catch with the grand kids. People say that most Local Three electricians only enjoy about 18 months of retirement benefits (their average life after retirement). My experience with Lobster gave me my first look at the future I might be looking forward to.

Note: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is proposing an ergonomics program standard to address the significant risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) confronting employees in various jobs in general industry workplaces. General industry employers covered by the standard would be required to establish an ergonomics program containing some or all of the elements typical of successful ergonomics programs: management leadership and employee participation, job hazard analysis and control, hazard information and reporting, training, MSD management, and program evaluation, depending on the types of jobs in their workplace and whether a musculoskeletal disorder covered by the standard has occurred.<sup>2</sup>

The first thing every one in construction should learn is, “Work smarter, not harder.” Take a moment to assess the task in front of you so that you can perform it with the least amount of brute force. This could add healthy years to your career and help you enjoy your golden years after retirement.

## **Beheaded**

This story is probably a myth, but I believe it to be true. Two plumbers were working on a vertical pipe run spanning many floors. While one man lowered pipe from the floor above, the man below lined it up and secured its fittings and support. This plan must have worked very well until there was a slip up. While the man below attached his fitting to the top of the pipe previously installed, the man above began to lower the next. I don’t know what caused him to lose his grip, but he did. The pipe plunged like a spear more than twenty feet down, severing his partner’s head, killing him instantly.

The man on the upper floor began to yell for his partner to see if all was well, but a stunned Local Three apprentice who had witnessed the tragedy told the man, “He’s dead.” Needless to say, the plumber must have been devastated by what just happened. What goes through a man’s mind when he just learns that his actions just killed someone, let alone his partner?

I imagine that the plumber didn’t hesitate, but ran down the stairs to see what just happened. I can just see him standing over his partner with fear and tears in his eyes while he calls the foreman over the radio and to tell him about the tragic accident.

When EMS and the police arrived at the scene, a crowd of people had already gathered. The apprentice who witnessed the accident was taken aside by his foreman who advised him not to speak about what happened and to return to the shanty. About 20 minutes later, the apprentice was escorted by two large men in black suits to a waiting limousine. They drove him home and strongly advised him to never mention a word about what happened to anyone. Later that day, he got a call informing him that he was being transferred to another job. The men on his former job arrived to work the next morning expecting to hear about what happened, but no one was there to explain the story. It is possible that the contractor didn’t want word of this tragic accident to scar its name and so silenced the situation.

Note: Case Reports of accidents investigated by OSHA illustrate how seemingly innocent workplace activities can have deadly consequences.

- For example, a carpenter was attempting to anchor a plywood form in preparation for pouring a concrete wall using a powder actuated tool. The nail passed through the hollow wall, traveled some 27 feet, and struck an apprentice in the head, killing him. The tool operator had never been trained in the proper use of the tool, and none of the employees in the area, including the victim, were wearing personal protective equipment.<sup>3</sup>

Every year, countless numbers of injuries go unrecorded. This could be because the workers knew that they'd done something wrong or that the workers were undocumented. Nonetheless, all accidents should be taken seriously. We shouldn't just become aware of the dangers and injuries once they hit the media.

### Falling Bricky

Note: Scaffolding reacts like a diving board when you jump on it ... Think about it.

*“Scaffold probe focuses on removal of metal tie”*

(By Raja Mishra and Donovan Slack, Globe Staff, 4/5/06)

Investigators examining the Boston scaffolding collapse that killed three people have focused their probe on whether it was human or mechanical error that resulted in the disconnection of a metal tie that had secured the 3-ton platform to the building, possibly triggering the fatal plunge, according to a high-ranking city official. (By Donovan Slack, Globe Staff, 4/11/06)

### Three-finger Ski

Three-finger Ski was a man who held industrial and factory positions as a young man and most of his adult life, but his first love was music. He was a very talented guitarist.

An accident injured him one day while he was operating a piece of machinery that he had used every day for a long time. Maybe he was distracted or just not focusing after having worked long hours at repetitive work, but somehow his hand entered the path of a multi-ton press and was smashed into a bloody pulp. He was rushed to the emergency room, and after hours had passed, the doctors informed him that they could save his hand. But they thought that he wouldn't

be able to play the guitar again due to loss of sensation in his hand and two missing fingers. Weighing his passion for the guitar and his tragic accident at work, Three-fingered Ski quickly chose music.

The doctors amputated his damaged digits and reconstructed his hand to look as if nothing happened. Many people didn't even notice his disability unless they were told about it. With his love for music as inspiration, he retaught himself to play the guitar with only three fingers on his left hand; to do this, he used his thumb as an extra helper play the frets, which is not usually done. As of this writing, he still plays the guitar in a band that plays weekly gigs at local bars in the rural town he lives in. He didn't retire a rich man, but he has his one true love and that's all he needs.

Note: The 2007 rate of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses requiring days away from work was 122 per 10,000 full-time workers, four percent below 2006. The key measure of severity – median days away from work – was unchanged at seven days. The 2007 rate of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) was 35 cases per 10,000 full-time workers, eight percent below 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Some times PPE can't protect you fully, so your best protection is awareness. Lack of concentration can be attributed to many jobsite accidents, especially when you become comfortable with a task and allow your mind to wonder. The safest people in my field are the ones who fear and respect electricity. Your mind is you best tool ... Use it.

## **Message**

This paper has both gruesome stories and a warning about safety. Just remember one thing: Your life is more important than getting a job done.

Listen to the old timers on the job, but don't stop learning when they stop speaking. There is a lot to be learned by watching the way they work. If they happen to be taking an unsafe path, it is up to you to not follow.

Each of these stories could have had a better outcome. None of the people were plagued by bad Karma or hexed with a curse. Most just used poor judgment that resulted in an accident.

Living your life as if every day was your last is not a smart choice for most. Some of us have very bright futures ahead of us and need to plan a journey that leads not only to success, but longevity, longevity

being the more important of the two. Be healthy enough to enjoy your retirement. What's the point of having a lot of money just to spend it all on physical therapy, medicine, or whatever you need to help you deal with the pain caused by your own poor judgment? Think about it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/scaffolding>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show\\_document?p\\_table=FEDERAL\\_REGISTER&p\\_id=16305](http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=FEDERAL_REGISTER&p_id=16305).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/construction/struckby/fatexstruck2.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/iif/>.

**John Bellitti**

**May 13, 2009**

**To: A Newbie**

**From: A Newbie**

### **TICK TOCK TICK TOCK**

**M**y advice applies to all apprentices from the newest to the oldest: Don't be late. Some mechanics won't mind if you're a little late, but others will think that you cannot handle the criteria of a good worker in the electrical field.

In some cases, you may show up late to find the boss on your jobsite and there you are, walking in half past the hour with your jacket and book bag on. That will get you in trouble and let your boss know how irresponsible you are. The boss will question if you are always late or if you just ran into some trouble today with transit or any other reason. You do not want to be put in that position; nor do you want to put your foreman in the position where he is under scrutiny from the big man about your coming in late and not reporting it.<sup>1</sup>

### **LOCK ERR UP**

The apprentice has a few unlisted rules that all should know; for example, the gang box is your responsibility. Unlocking the locks and opening up the gang box is the first thing on your morning to do list (your first priority of the day), but don't open it too early.

If no one is present in your crew, do not open up the gang box. Wait for one of your superiors to come on the site before you unlock the box. If the men come and the box is open and things are moved, they may suspect that you are stealing tools and/or material. Even though that was not your intention, others may view it that way.

When the time is right to begin your day, open up the gang box and remove the company tools if they are on top of any worker's tool bags. Neither the apprentices nor any other workers should remove another man's tools from the box unless they need to get their bag from underneath. If this is necessary, put the other bag back as soon

as you have retrieved your tools. Some of the men, especially the ones who don't know you because you are new, don't like you touching their bags, nor do you want them to suspect you of opening up their bag and going through it.

If your crew leaves to work on another floor, make sure that you lock the gang box up again. If you return and things are missing, you may get blamed for not locking the box.

Tools and materials are very expensive. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to be blamed for a four hundred dollar drill that went missing. Things go wrong in big buildings, so if you're on another floor and must be evacuated, it may be hours before you can return.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes there are many different trades and people working in the same building. Between laborers, security, and other people walking around the building, things go missing very quickly.

At the end of the day, make sure that everyone's tools and equipment are locked back up and that the gang box is chained to a stationary object like a pole or riser pipe. Whatever material you took out or that came in during the day must be put back and locked up. You may have to drill a few more holes on the floor you are working on, and yes it would be easier just to leave or hide the Hilti there instead of carrying it up ten floors, but you will be held responsible if that drill goes missing. You must always lock up anything you took out.

## **STEP-BY-STEP**

Some jobs have over twenty ladders scattered among different floors and buildings. It is an unwritten rule that those ladders are your responsibility. The apprentice must unlock the ladders at the beginning of the day and lock them all up at the end. In some cases, you will also be expected to carry those ladders to the journeymen.

This industry cares for its workers. You do not want to injure yourself or pass out from carrying ladders all around the building for an hour in ninety degree weather. If you feel weak or tired, take a breather, get a cold drink, and continue when you are ready to do so. You don't want your family getting a call saying you are in the hospital because you fell down the stairs carrying your twentieth ladder down ten flights of stairs. Don't be ashamed to tell a journeymen or foreman that you cannot continue to carry the ladders without a break. Most of the time they will understand; you're all brothers and sisters. Don't make up excuses if you are just lazy. You will get nowhere being lazy in this industry.<sup>3</sup>

When you are working with journeymen and they start working above the last step of the ladder, give them some support. Hold the ladder to make sure it doesn't tip over. You are not supposed to stand above the last step, but in some instances you just need to.

While the journeyman is up on the ladder, he or she may require different materials to finish the task and will ask you to get them. Before you let go of the ladder, move slowly and make sure that your hands aren't the only things keeping the ladder balanced.

### **WATCHA NEED?**

When you are out of materials, you should keep a list of what you need. Many journeymen have a lot on their minds and need your assistance in thinking about this. You cannot rely on them all the time to tell you exactly what to do. If you are running low on BX connectors, and you know that you will need a lot more to complete the job, jot this down and at the end of the day give it to the foreman so he can order the needed materials for delivery the next day.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the tools have nicknames that may only be familiar in the electrical trade. For example a "Wiggy" is a solenoid tester for voltage. You can search all day for a Wiggy and not find one; meanwhile, you have one in your bag that was given to you at orientation. It's for your own benefit to ask what things are if you have no idea what they look like or are called.

Do not be ashamed or feel embarrassed to ask because you will only be hurting yourself. You will not know everything but will get to know all the material that is required for your job. Other tools that have nicknames are and that are used very often are:

- a Hilti, a type of hammer drill that is often used to make holes for double expansion shields that fold up rods.
- a May West, which is a strap for conduit that can be connected to rods and beam clamps or drilled into the wall/duct.
- an Alamac, which is the outdoor temporary elevator.
- Zippies, which are self tapping screws.
- the Shanty, which is the make-shift temporary housing for tools and for break time.

### **DING DONG**

Deliveries on a job can come once at the beginning of the job or as many as four times a day. Apprentices are the lowest paid laborers on the job, so it's their duty to retrieve the deliveries.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes you will need more than one person to bring everything up, and sometimes you will just have to make more several trips to get all the materials in. Either way, you're the one going for them.

In some cases the journeyman will just say, "Deliveries here." They will not tell you specifically to go get them, but you should know to automatically take responsibility for the deliveries. Many times a lot of material will come at once on a big delivery truck and you must sign for the delivery and check the sheet versus the material to assure that all that is supposed to be there is there.

## **ZAPP!**

"The subject first feels great heat on the head, bright lights dance before his eyes, there is a tingling all over the body, roaring sounds in the ears, sometimes ravishing sounds of music, a feeling of heavy weights to the feet, then – insensibility," said Dr. William Hammond when describing the death by electric chair (qtd. in Simon, 2004, p. 223). At least when you're in the electric chair you know its gunning for you, but when you're walking around with conduit over your shoulder and bump into a hanging live wire, you sure as hell weren't expecting that; nor were you expecting to die.<sup>6</sup>

Your journeyman doesn't want anything to happen to you. If something does happen, not only will they take the blame for it, but they will be psychologically messed up knowing that you were under their watch. When they tell you don't do something, listen. They are your brothers and sisters; they want to look out for you.

You are going to get called "kid" and other names like that, but take it with a grain of salt. They are just looking out for you. When they teach you how to do something, try to do it their way. Ask them if there is a reason why they do things the way they do if you do not understand why they are doing it that way

## **CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?**

There is a reason why driving while talking on a cell phone is illegal. It is dangerous. Being on a cell at the workplace is the same thing. There are so many things going on that you must always be alert. You cannot be walking around looking carefully while you are texting on your phone. The next thing you know, you will be falling through a hole in the floor that you did not see because you were texting. You may be yapping away on your phone and not hear a distress call from

one of your coworkers. I don't think you would want it on your head that you were talking to your boys about going out tonight when a guy next to you got hung up on a grid and zapped.

Talking on your cell phone is also rude. When your journeymen are up on a ladder and look down wanting to ask you for material, they will be offended if you're not paying attention because you are busy making plans for who will buy the liquor tonight. This is your career now. Pay attention and learn as much as you can. Be a help, not a hindrance.<sup>7</sup>

### **Mm Mm MMM**

Have a pen handy at a quarter to nine in the morning. This is almost coffee time. The apprentice is like the watchman and must know the time. Don't wait until nine to start taking orders for coffee, because by the time you get back, it will almost be lunch time in some locations.<sup>8</sup>

When you are taking orders, make sure you don't mess them up. Most guys will joke around with you if you mess up their order and make you feel like a dope the entire week, but others who are cranky will get pissed off. You may have to go get them another order or even give them their money back because they didn't get what they ordered. Luckily I haven't run into people like this, but I know people who have. I have messed up orders, but the men I work with are cool and don't really mind if it happens once in a while, as long as you have at least something for them.

Many apprentices take a massively long time to return with coffee break items. When you are leaving, don't be excessively long before you return. You don't have to rush, but don't relax in the park for twenty minutes either before you get coffee. In some cases the foreman or mechanic will tell you "Don't rush." Take his word for it. Maybe the job is almost done and he doesn't want two guys standing around doing nothing until the end of the day.

### **SIMMER DOWN CLASS**

Throughout your years as an apprentice in Local Three, you will be required to attend classes about electrical theory once a week. These classes are long and must be kept on top of. If you miss one class, you will be lost for a while. Every class adds onto the class before. Don't miss any classes unless you have a higher obligation, which unless it's a family emergency, can wait for another day.

A lot of apprentices say “We are allowed three absences. Why not take them?” The answer is simple: If you miss three classes each semester, you will have to make it up another time. You need a certain amount of hours to be promoted to the next level of your apprenticeship. Why would you want to wait another six months before you advance?

There is a lot to know about the field of electricity. Don’t be dumb and think you know everything and don’t need school. Many think school is just a hindrance, and it might feel like that, but this is your career. You have to stay on top of your school work if you want to last in this industry.<sup>9</sup>

All apprentices must attend college also. This is to give us a higher education. The local does not want to be represented by a bunch of uneducated people who have no clue what they are talking about. Even if you have a degree in another subject, you still must go to college. In this case, you need to earn a twenty-credit Labor Studies Certificate to fulfill your obligation. If you don’t have any degree, you will be required to earn one during your years as an apprentice electrician. Don’t mess up this free education that will benefit you. Many people say “This whole school thing is a gimmick for the board to get money from the Feds”; but even if it is, you are the last one laughing because you’re the one getting a free education.

## **AMEN**

Your apprenticeship will not last forever, even if it feels like you will be an apprentice making a crappy salary for the rest of your life.

Sometimes you will get down thinking about it. What gets me through when I get depressed about the low wages is thinking about how quickly things change. For example, I went to college for four years; now I look back and say to myself “Damn, where did that time go?” And then I realize that I am almost done with my second semester at school for my apprenticeship. That means that I have almost been here for a year now.

## **Time flies.**

It may seem like an eternity before you can make some real money that could support a family, but the truth be told, it will be here before you know it.

Your apprenticeship experience is the beginning of a career that can earn you a living and take you many places. Once you earn a journeyman's card, you can use it anywhere in the United States and even in Canada. After this apprenticeship, you can continue working in the field, move up into management with your company, advance onto the joint board, or even create your own company.

“When we deal with electricity, we are not sure of anything,” said Daniel L. Gibbens, member of the Board of Electrical Control (qtd. in Simon, 2004, p.230). He is right on point. Beginning with not testing units before you work on them to not extending your ladder fully before working upon it, you never know what could happen.

Wherever your path may lead you, just make sure you know what you are doing, make sure you and your co-workers are safe, and strive to become the best damn electrician out there.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I know its very hard making an extremely low salary for the first four years and wanting to do your best. It is very hard to find initiative when you only gross three hundred and fifty dollars a week before taxes, annuity, and the 401k. But this is your career. You make horrible wages now, but in a few years you will be good for the next 40 years.
- <sup>2</sup> It was around half past noon on one job when the sirens blared loudly. The whole building, One Bryant Park, had to be evacuated. Afterwards, our crew was enjoying pizza on the roof, given to us by the vendor we were working for. We all knew that we wouldn't be back in the building before our seven hours were up, so we left and went home. If I hadn't taken the initiative to lock up the gang box before we went to another floor in the sixty-story building, one of us would have had to wait to get back into the building just to put a lock on, which may have been five hours later after the fire department had checked out the whole building. After this experience, I always lock up the gang box when we go on break or to another floor.
- <sup>3</sup> When I was working in uptown Manhattan on a job pulling 500 mcm wire, a journeyman was on a 16 foot ladder trying to guide the wire being pulled through a pull box. 500s are very hard to move and are not very flexible. The journeyman was pulling with all his might to try and change the direction of the wire, and his ladder slipped out from under him. If he wasn't in a rush to get out of work and had opened up the ladder supports all the way, he wouldn't have fallen 12 feet to the floor. He was all right, but he could have gotten seriously injured. He was lazy and in a rush, and that's when these things happen. You might be lucky like this man and not get hurt, but a good percentage of people would have gotten hurt from that fall.

- <sup>4</sup> Coming into the industry, I had no idea what half of the materials were called. When summoned to get some half-inch Greenfield, I said sure. When I got to the shanty I looked for a box that said Greenfield and brought the journeyman back half-inch Greenfield connectors. I had no idea that Greenfield was a type of flexible conduit. I thought that everything I would need to retrieve for the men was labeled, but that is not the case. You must learn your materials; there are so many different things for different applications that you may not even see something until you're in the business for ten
- <sup>5</sup> In my first week I signed for one thousand feet of half inch EMT. I know now that each bundle is one hundred feet. I did not know that my first week. I carried nine bundles to the second floor and piled them up. At the end of the week the job came to a halt because we were 85 feet shy of reaching our conduit run destination, and there was no more conduit around. The men thought that someone stole a bundle of EMT and were searching all over the site for it. They asked me if I had left any bundles on the loading dock, and I said that I was positive I hadn't. After all the commotion died down, I said that I had brought in nine bundles off the truck, and the situation was solved. Knowing the materials and accounting for everything received is a big responsibility.
- <sup>6</sup> I bet my cousin didn't think the last thing he would be doing before he died would be carrying a bundle of one inch. He was an apprentice in California and died just this way. "This would never happen to me," you're definitely saying to yourselves. I know I say it plenty of times to myself, but when you actually know a person and it happens to them, it's like "Shit, I do this everyday. It sure as hell could happen to me." With that in note, make sure you take advice from people who know what they are talking about. You don't know everything. No one knows everything, so listen when people talk to you. Sometimes you will want to be a little stubborn making a little over ten dollars an hour, but this is electricity. It's no time to pretend that you know everything.
- <sup>7</sup> The company that I work for had three apprentices when I first became a member of the local. About three weeks after I started, I found out that one apprentice had gotten laid off because he was sitting down in a panel closet talking on his phone. Meanwhile the boss came on the job and heard the kid's voice in the closet. The boss waited outside and timed how long the young man was on his phone. After the kid hung up, the boss came in and said "Goodbye, Thanks for working with us." The second apprentice also received a bad layoff for excessive cell phone use. No one wanted to work with her because all she did all day was talk on her Bluetooth. Now I am the only apprentice left. I do not want a bad layoff on my slip, so I'm going to keep the cell phone usage to a minimum when possible. When you go to the joint board with a problem or request, a bad layoff doesn't look good on your record.
- <sup>8</sup> When I was working at One Bryant Park, I was the only apprentice for eight guys and had to take coffee orders at eight in the morning. By the time the almanac took me down from the 44th floor, a half hour had passed. It took another fifteen minutes to make my way through the midtown morning havoc to reach a deli where you didn't have to sell your body for a muffin. In Midtown Manhattan, some delis are ridiculously expensive, and the journeymen don't want you to spend seven dollars on egg/cheese/bacon roll when you could have bought it a block away for three dollars. After dealing with the deli's morning rush, I might

return to my worksite two seconds too late and miss the lift going up and then have to wait twenty minutes for it to return. After another five minutes on the alamac to get to the 44th floor, I'd achieved my coffee run, so I'd gather the guys and take a break. The change I got back from the order was always mine.

- <sup>9</sup> I attend electrical theory classes on Wednesday nights at 5 p.m. These classes feel like an eternity to get through. Over three hours in the same room, listening to the same teacher talk is a death sentence. I cannot wait to get out of there, but I remain strong and stick it out. Many are not like me; they take all three of their allowed absences, and they leave when the teacher is not looking. Yo! Brothers and sisters, you are only hurting yourself. These kids who come back to class after absences have no idea what is going on. When the tests come around, they cheat because they have no idea what the answers are. If you need help and are really struggling, then I guess it's not so bad to seek help from your neighbor, but at least try to get the answer by yourself first. Those answers aren't going to be there when you run into a problem in the field. Who will help you then?

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# Field Guide to Being an Ideal TA1

## Will Castro

**A**fter only a year as an apprentice for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union Local Three, I've seen and learned a few things so far. Before becoming an apprentice I owned my own business, so I know something about what an employer expects from an employee.

As apprentices, we should take full advantage of our opportunity to work for the Local Three. Still, there are situations that can make an apprentice's work very difficult. What follows are a few things to keep in mind to make the four-year apprenticeship go a little more smoothly.

### Follow the Journeyperson

Every now and then apprentices have the opportunity to be partnered up with a journeyperson who is willing to teach them the trade. If the apprentices are very fortunate, they will be taught about the shortcuts of the business, which will be helpful in the years ahead.

However, there are other times when a journeyperson expects the apprentice to already know the business. Apprentices might be sent to get materials that they aren't familiar with or be expected to be able to predict the next move that the journeyperson is going to make.

It is helpful to create a working relationship with the journeyperson. Sometimes it might feel like pulling teeth, but it is not impossible and can help the day go more smoothly. Apprentices learn to learn patience because they will need it. If an apprentice shows some initiative, the journeyperson might open up and treat the apprentice as a person rather than as someone who doesn't care. Sometimes it helps to be quiet and just do what the journeyperson says.

Don't show any signs of laziness, because that's the first thing that a journeyperson complains about when asked about the apprentice's job performance. Show interest in the trade and ask work-related questions. Apprentices should give the journeyperson the impression that they are willing to learn. Journeypersons would rather invest their time to teach a motivated apprentice who is willing to learn.

In addition, when apprentices establish a good relationship with the journeyperson, they learn a lot of things that are learned on the jobsite and not in the classroom.

## **The Safe Way Is the Best Way**

Throughout the construction industry, apprentices hear a lot about safety, working safe, and even the phrase, “Don’t get hurt, kid.” It is very important that the apprentice follow all of the safety regulations or someone might get hurt. Nobody wants to get hurt, especially if it’s by somebody who is working carelessly. Be aware of the surroundings on the jobsites.

Double check everything and carry a voltage or proximity tester at all times. There will be times where the journeyperson will ask the apprentice to cut wires. The wire must be dead before it is cut, and because electricity cannot be seen or smelled, a voltage tester or a proximity tester will test to see if the wire is live. Otherwise the tools that are being used might blow up, or at worst somebody can get electrocuted.

Look for working hazards such as jagged edges, pencil rods, and even holes in the floors. Because holes in the floor are common hazards, they should be marked and covered with a piece of wood or steel that can hold a good amount of weight.

Unfortunately, every jobsite is different and on some jobsites, not all safety precautions are taken. Tell someone if there is a problem that’s not being taken care of. Put up a temporary blockade so nobody can get hurt and find the safety director. There are people on jobsites who are in charge of safety, and they will do something about the hazard if they are notified. If there isn’t a safety director, then find a laborer who is in charge of building signs and maintaining the jobsite.

Safety equipment should be available and provided by the employer. If there is safety equipment that is needed, make sure that the foreman or whoever is in charge of ordering materials and safety equipment knows about it. On some jobs gloves, masks, eye protection, and ear protection are provided for everyone to use. It is very important that the apprentice take advantage of all this protective gear. Many apprentices work in the construction industry for more than 30 years, and it isn’t the cleanest or quietest working environment. There are health consequences for working under some of these conditions, and with time, workers can develop illnesses that could have been prevented by using a dust mask or earplugs. Use the safety equipment that is provided because it’s there for an important reason.

## Working Together

Depending on the size of the jobsite there can be other tradeworkers working alongside the electricians. These could be plumbers, steamfitters, tin knockers, and carpenters to name a few. Most of these jobs can take years to complete. It is very important to coexist with these other trades, but there are always differences in personalities, and this can create conflict. This is a foreman's worst nightmare.

But ultimately whoever is on the job has the responsibility to complete it. Conflicts are usually dealt with. It doesn't take much to lay somebody off for disorderly conduct on the job because it's one less headache for the foreman. But that lay off report doesn't look good for a worker when job reassignment takes place. Try to get along with everybody. If a situation does occur, follow the chain of command. Notify a journeyman if the issue continues so that the journeyman can take the problem to the straw or foreman. They will find a solution to what is happening, so there shouldn't be a reason for the apprentice to be fighting or having other problems on the jobsite. Just follow the chain of command. It would make life much easier if there weren't any jerks in the world.

## Knowledge Is Electrical Power

The phrase "knowledge is power" holds its meaning in the electrical industry. As an apprentice, knowing the materials and where they are stored is very important. For a TA1, many of the materials may look like scrap pieces of metal, but everything on those carts and gang boxes has a purpose. In the beginning, it is difficult to learning the names of the materials, and sometimes the terms don't make sense. But ask questions and listen, because there is a reason for all the names and terminology.

In this industry, there is more than one name for different materials and tools. For example, the well-known five-inch box is also known as a 1900 box. A cleaver's hanger is also known as a mineral lack or a May West for the shape of its body. A pair of adjustable pliers is known as channels, and a pipe level used to make sure an offset is bent straight is known as a no dog. Apprentices will learn the names and uses for items such as power tools, hammer drills, chopping guns, band saws, and saw zalls.

Every apprentice will get familiar with the chopping gun. In my wonderful experience, I chopped holes in floors or walls or wherever the foreman needed a hole. Knowing the names of the tools and materials helps out, especially when a journeyman asks for a tool or for some materials. This also gives apprentices the chance to demonstrate to the journeyman that they are willing and capable of knowing about the materials and tools.

Keep the gang boxes and material carts as clean and organized as possible so that the apprentice knows where all the materials are. When a journeyman or foreman asks for a type of hanger or beam clamp, knowing what it looks like and where to find it helps the apprentice's image. When an apprentice is sent to material detail, this shouldn't be taken as a punishment. Take it as a learning experience. Also, the apprentices should learn as they receive deliveries, sort them, and put them away.

When it's clean up time, making sure that everything is in its place so it can be found for the next day. All the ladders and gang boxes are locked up so that they don't grow legs and walk. Organizational skills, though not a requirement, help when the tools and materials have to be put away.

## **Keeping Your Eyes on the Future**

Once apprentices have finished their programs, they become journeymen and receive their "A Journeymen" card. Some journeymen who have had years in the business tell stories about how easy their apprenticeships were. Unfortunately, some of them don't have the required training that they should have obtained if they had fully completed the program. A few journeymen simply don't know what to do when they arrive at a jobsite.

There are also journeymen who simply don't care. They might have had bad experiences with other electrical companies and assume that all companies are the same. They might arrive at a jobsite with attitudes and have nothing good to say about the electrical industry. Don't listen to them, because they probably pay attention only to the negative issues and may tell the apprentice that the Local Three will not last.

In my personal opinion, being a union electrician is still a very good career. Don't believe all the rumors that float around. An apprentice will hear about how Local Three will not last long than five years or that there will not be pensions when the electrician retire.

I had a journeyman tell me that he first heard that there will be no pensions when he was an apprentice 20 years ago. Yet there is still an annuity fund that grows with every passing week.

Some journeymen enjoy what they do for a living, but others feel they are god's gift to the electrical industry. They get a kick out of talking down to apprentices and pushing them around. They play tricks and jokes on apprentices, and in some cases, it's all fun and games. All these tricks were played on them when they were apprentices, and they simply want to pay that forward. But in some cases, people have an attitude problem, and there may be nothing that an apprentice can do about that. Just do the best you can and have patience.

## Leadership

I have worked with only four foremen. The company I worked for had four jobs going on at the same time, so I was transferred back and forth among them. This gave me the opportunity to learn different skills and techniques from each of them. They each have their own ways of handling their own jobs. One foreman would spend three quarters of the day stressed out about making any decisions that had to be made. The man loved to work, but he would rather have worked with his tools rather than to layout tasks for the workers.

Another foreman showed no signs of stress and wouldn't crack under pressure. Yet he hated to pick up or even look at a blueprint. All the journeymen would have to wait until the foreman was ready to layout work for them so they could begin.

As with any industry, some foremen know their jobs better than others do. Even an apprentice who doesn't plan to become a foreman should learn how these jobs are run. I learned many skills from these foremen. The best skill is one that everyone has but many are afraid to use, and that is simply "thinking outside of the box." There is more than one way to complete a task. All an apprentice would have to do is to think of an alternative.

Apprentices won't find the "thinking outside of the box" skill from a textbook but from experience. Life becomes a little easier with that one simple common sense skill. But as long as foremen are willing to teach, take full advantage of it and learn. The foremen are responsible for their apprentices; they should take their apprentices under their wings and show them what will be expected of them.

## Keeping It Clean

Cleaning up the shanty is an unwritten rule for apprentices. The shanty is where the day begins, where all of the electricians have their breaks, and where the days end. Keeping the shanty clean can be difficult because many journeypersons are not the cleanest people in the world. After coffee breaks, some throw their sandwich wrappers or empty cups of coffee on the floor even though a waste basket sits right outside of the shanty. As an apprentice, keep the shanty clean and organized. It avoids a lot of complaining and pointing fingers. Additionally, if the shanty does start looking like a pig sty, the foreman will end up telling the apprentice to pick up, so either get it done early or get prepared to hear the complaints. The journeypersons will also complain about having a messy shanty, just as there will always be someone complaining about something.

## Where's the Coffee

The apprentice has the important task of getting coffee. Coffee is usually starts at 9 a.m., but depending on the job, it's sometimes later. Apprentices should be on their way getting the coffee order at 8:30 am or earlier. If extra time is needed, take it, because time is lost when mistakes are made. Somebody is bound to make a mistake, whether it's the apprentice or the coffee shop. The apprentice might forget to order a sandwich, the sandwich might not be made to order, or maybe the grill man forgot to make it. The apprentice will also need extra time if the location of the coffee shop or restaurant is far or if it's a big order.

When I take the order from the journeypersons, I make a list. On that list are the number of coffees, their sizes, and if they take milk. I don't put any sugar in people's coffee. I bring packages of sugar so people can add it themselves. The journeypersons will order something to eat, so that goes on the list as well. For every journeyperson, I repeat their order and the amount of money they gave me after I have written it down. I don't mix up their change, because they want it back. But after the coffee is paid for, the loose change goes to the apprentice.

Once at the coffee shop, the apprentice gives the orders for the sandwich or meals. Be very specific with all the special orders because some journeypersons are very picky. The coffee is ordered last, since nobody wants to drink cold coffee unless they ordered ice coffee. Before leaving the deli, I double check everything and make sure to ask for a receipt for all the coffees and meals. A check list is useful.

Leaving extra time becomes helpful when something is missing; you can correct the problem with time to spare. Grab a lot of sugars, splenda, salt, pepper, ketchups, and any other condiments that have been requested.

Head back to the shanty at 9 a.m. or at the time they tell you to. The return of change can be handled during or after the coffee time. Return only the dollars, since the loose change is considered a tip to the apprentice. If the change is not returned to the journeypersons, they will hunt you down for it. Sometimes the journeypersons give extra tips to the apprentice, and these tips can add up. Break is over at 9:15 unless you have a cool foreman who gives the crew an extra 15 minutes for coffee.

Don't stand up until the other journeypersons get up or when the foreman says to get back to work. Once the break is over, it's helpful to hand out a bag for all the garbage so that the shanty doesn't get too messy.

## **Wrap It Up**

Cleaning up the work space at the end of the day is another job for the apprentice. Tasks such as organizing all the ladders and locking them up can take a bit of time. Sometimes the journeypersons will help out and put their own things away, but the jobs of locking everything up and making sure that everything is set up for the next day remain the apprentice's responsibility.

What I usually do at the very end of the day is to walk around one last time to make sure that everything is picked up and put away. On some jobsites, other people are around and materials, tools, or ladders can be stolen. That's not good because the blame can fall on the apprentice. Also, getting things organized at the end of the day makes the next morning's work easier.

## **Make the Best of It**

In the shop where I had the privilege of working, there were a lot of good and humble journeypersons. They were easy going and liked to have fun. This makes the day go faster and easier. Nothing beats having fun at work. It starts to feel as if we are friends having fun together.

Even now and then the foreman has to crack the whip to remind everybody that they are at work. But as long as everybody is doing their jobs safely, quickly, and correctly, there shouldn't be a problem with a few laughs.

#### Make It Work Because You Have Four-and-a-half Years Left

What I have written are just a few things that are expected from an electrical apprentice for the Local Three. I will have plenty more experiences throughout my life in this career.

This story is told through my eyes. Not all apprentices have the same experiences. For some, it might be the worst four years of their lives. But I hope that my ideas and advice will serve as an idea about what to expect as an electrical apprentice.

# Electricity: The Path Electrified To And Through

Mike Howell

## Electricity Can Be Filled With Danger

**Y**es, electricity is filled with danger, and if you are not careful, it can kill you quick. Yet that same shock that threatened your life can save a heart that is a little bit sick.

## What Is The Meaning Of Coffee?

The coffee run is a test to see what kind of an apprentice you will be. The journeyman wants to know if you can be trusted with a simple task. Or is that too much to ask? You'll know when you bring back the coffee orders and someone doesn't get what they ordered. They might fire their sandwich against the wall, where it explodes on impact into a molten mess. This is trial and error in its simplest form. The task seems menial, but when an apprentice fills out a coffee list, he is in fact filling out a material list, a skill that he will use later on in his career.

## Great Visions That Shaped What All of Us Today Enjoy

The creators of this union and other unions just like it had great visions that shaped what all of us today enjoy. They had to suffer through great hardships and sometimes death so we could benefit from their commitments.

In the movie "Brave Heart," William Wallace was asked if he feared death. His response was "Everyone dies, but not everyone really lives ." There are so many things that can kill electricians, so why would anybody want to do this? Ask an electrician why he would want to be involved in this trade, and you might get thousands of reasons why. However the one thing that stands out for some is a love for being an electrician and for the group of people around him.

## **Some People View A Road as a Path**

To become an electrician is a road that for the most part could start anywhere and be triggered by something or someone. Some people view a road as a path, a conduit to a destination or an end. Roads are like wires that sometimes go from Point A to Point B or even go in a circle. Sometimes roads are covered, and sometimes they are not; like a wire, they go somewhere and then come back.

## **Why Did I Want To Be An Electrician?**

For me, it was a personal tragedy that triggered my interest and changed my outlook. The tragedy was the death of my brother, who was a non-union electrician who always wanted to join a union. Death of a family member literally shocks the system, changes a person's outlook, and brings things into perspective. Petty things don't bother you anymore, yet other things become intriguing.

## **The Current of Change**

Now what would ruffle the feathers of a plumber, a member of a tough and labor-intensive trade? When I was a plumber, I would put a boiler together, but it wasn't finished until an electrician brought it to life. The electrical field started to intrigue me, so I took some courses at Boces Vocational School, and the more I learned about electricity more, the more it intrigued me. It took me ten years to get into the Local and the greatest fear I have is not knowing enough about the danger.

Although time heals old wounds, I still miss my brother, but life goes on. Now I know why he loved this trade where you can bring things that were lifeless to life and bring light where there was only darkness. It seems that everything in the house or at work needs electricity to run it. Where would the toaster be without electricity? Probably out in the cold. How could I check my email or how could I hear my music as loud as could be (hopefully not too deafeningly loud) without electricity? What was it like back in Edison's and Westinghouse's time when those mad scientists lit up the city screaming, "It's alive!"

## What Is A Snake Hold?

This is an electrical hold that grabs you like an anaconda or the poison of a venomous snake. It paralyzes and squeezes the life right out of you. To be paralyzed while seeing the world around you and not being able to shout out or to speak: This is why we don't work with live wire.

## The Stories You Hear

I heard a story about how an electrician "Tom" was caught up on a ladder frozen by the hold of 277 volts. It doesn't take much for this to happen, even for a qualified electrician. As the volt hold caught Tom, he started shaking slightly, which most people probably wouldn't notice. Luckily another electrician walked by, saw the shaking, and kicked out the latter from under Tom. Down Tom came and the snake hold was broken. His legs were also broken, but this was his lucky day because he was alive and happy. The electric hold had been so great that that he couldn't jump or speak.

At another job I was working on, two electricians got blasted after lunch. While they were gone, someone went into an electrical panel and turned on the circuit they had been working on. The circuit really should have been lock off and tagged, and the two electricians should have tested the circuit after they came back from lunch.

Always have a tester with you to test the circuit; never assume that it's dead. Treat every circuit as if it is living before working on it. It was a painful lesson, but thank god nobody died. Maybe other electricians were more careful afterwards.

## Can You Trust The Person You Work With?

I blew up my pliers when I was a new apprentice and was told to go splice together a circuit. Thinking it was de-energized, I cut across three phases instead of cutting one wire at a time. This was a major "no no" because you always cut one wire at a time. There was an instant flash and a hole in my brand new pliers. It scared the hell out of me. This 10 wire was supposedly de-energized at the time. The biggest mistake was mine; always test the circuit you are working on; people are human; they make mistakes; so test everything. No exceptions and you will live longer. I don't care who tells you it's not alive, trust no one and test it yourself.

## Unions, What's The Difference?

In a union, the difference from being paid what you're worth and the education provided can prevent you from being a statistic on a chart. Long ago when I was not in the trades, I worked in a print shop as an artist. I went to school for it. We were all underpaid and overworked, so the print shop part of this company tried to go union. I knew most of these guys, and all they wanted was better pay and negotiating rights. Not much to ask for, right? Wrong, according to the company.

I didn't agree with the company's philosophy, so I decided to meet with the union representative, and while the company was fighting with the printer's division, I would try to unionize the art department. I thought that this would provide a diversion to give the union another advantage by dividing the company's resources to fight two different battles.

The union representative said if you want to start a union you needed thirty percent of the work force of the art department to get started and the workers signatures to start a union. That's what I did, I confronted the thirty percent that I thought I could trust and right under the pennysaver's noses, started the legal right to make the company union.

This is when you really learn the process about how to start a union and the dirty tactics a company will use to crush it. I realized this a mile down the parkway when both of my tires blew out, not one but two. Coincidence? I don't think so. The union was defeated because of the lying and treachery of the company, bringing in a union-busting company, accusing, promising, scaring, and dividing the employees.

The movement was also defeated by my lack of information. Had I known what I know now from working with the Local Three, I know it would have been different. The experience taught me a lesson. "United we stand, divided we fall" really meant something to me. The same people that that spoke up for this in the beginning were the same people who stabbed me in the back (figuratively) and ended any chance for a union to take hold in this company. I won't go to Wal-Mart and you will never see me read a pennysaver. Long live the union.

## Always Be Wary Of Working under Other Trades

When I was working as a stone mason, I was walking toward the exit right before lunch time. Five floors above me, bricklayers were working, which was no big deal until a brick tong landed right in front

of me. A brick tong is tool that is used to carry eight or ten bricks at a time and is made of steel. I was wearing my hard hat, but dropped tools can do a lot of damage. Safety is the utmost concern when dealing with other trades. Always be vigilant and always have overhead protection for yourself and for your fellow brothers and sisters.

## **You Have To Pay Your Dues**

I have enjoyed every bit of this journey to be an electrician; well, maybe not every bit, but you have to pay your dues in this trade. Every electrician who has passed through this process has said to me, “We went through the program too when we got in. We don’t care how old or young you are, but every year, try to go to a different shop. This will make you well-rounded electrician.” A journey is a journey, and the more you learn, the more fascinated you become with this-ever changing technology. Like I said, “What I fear is not knowing enough.” That’s perilous.

## **What Does the Future Hold, What’s Blowing in the Wind?**

While I am writing this, it is very cold and windy. What a waste not to capture this abundance of free energy. Wind turbines are not without their faults and must be right type of turbine for the location where they are used. For example, large horizontal propellers are good for offshore wind and windy areas. However, if you try putting one of those in your neighborhood, you might find out how crazy your neighbors can be when the noise keeps them up at night.

In some low wind areas, vertical turbines work with winds of five miles an hour or less. There are other advances that are as ever changing as the business itself. In Chicago, Bill Becker invented a small, multiple corkscrew-shaped wind turbine to catch the wind from multiple directions at once – city winds, the chaotic wind environments especially felt with winter winds that whip around the buildings. These turbines are quiet in a city of constant noise and also quiet enough for suburban customers who need their sleep.

Quiet power is good and offers multiple uses for the architects of tomorrow. No more waste of pure electrical power, just using the power that is blowing in the wind. These are also a good hybrid counterpart to the new solar panels that are already in Electchester’s supermarkets.

## **What Does The Future Hold When The Sun Comes Up?**

The rapid advances of solar technologies are making it cheaper to add green technology to mainstream electrical customers, creating more opportunities for Local Three members. Dr. Alan Heeger at the University of California has introduced a new way to generate power from sunlight: solar ink printed on thin film. This breed of material produces electricity when exposed to sunlight. The thin film, which is only a few thousandths of an inch thick, generates electricity far more efficiently than a traditional cell that weighs a hundred pounds or more. Because the ink is translucent, it could be applied to windows, so the applications are limitless. Think about all the buildings that are made of glass. Think about solar tiles attached to roofs and the ability to blend these tiles into the roof by modifying the color to match the roof.

The current panel technology's installation method is still somewhat the same, so adding newer solar array improvements to older units is easy for skilled electricians now exposed to this new technology. All these applications also need to be installed and wired.

## **The Tip Of The Iceberg**

These are the tips of the iceberg: solar towers, underwater turbines, solar geothermal power plants, and algae oil or cellulose fuel modifications for automobiles and home heating. Algae oil modifications are cleaning body waste in new improved sewage power plants where the byproduct is algae fuel. Why not replace the oil and gas infrastructure to make it more environmentally friendly? Changing the fuel in certain power plants is one answer. Some power plants just need to be made more clean and efficient, and yes, more electrical work will be needed to do this work: power supply, upgrades, wiring, maintenance, and much more.

## **Why Did I Really Get Into This Field?**

I got into this field, because something, someone, or many things sparked my interest. It could have been the death of my brother, it could have been the lore of newer and cleaner technologies, or it could have been just friends. Many different chains of events led me here. Electricity, like music, is an expression of yourself and your training. It sounds corny, but so what, because the more passionate you are

in learning, the more passionate you are about achieving your goals. My goal is to never stop learning. When you stop learning, you stop living.

I didn't get into this field to feel comfortable, and the ever-changing technologies being invented and reinvented are transforming the world as they did in the last century and the century before that. I became an electrician to ask questions such as "How does that work?" "How can we make this energy cleaner and replace the old with the new as we realize that the new is something that was explored by the old?" "How can we provide energy profitably but without damaging the world around us and not putting our brothers out of work, but putting them back to work?"

I am sick of hearing that this union isn't what it used to be. Times are tough right now, but business goes in cycles up and down. Things are down now, but they will improve. I'm also sick and tired of hearing from the other unions that the Local Three used to be the best. Guess what, it's time to be the best again. Mistakes are there to be learned from. Invention and discovery cannot be contained in a box, so it's time to smash the box and look outside it. When you don't learn lessons from the past, how do you expect to achieve what you can do in the future?

## **Find Your Weaknesses**

You know your strengths, so now find your weaknesses. You can be really good at one thing and yet terrible at another, and that's how you find out what you're not good at. Talk about this with your journeyman. Tell him what you need to learn or do better. It's better not to know something now, when you can learn it, than when you will be expected to already know it.

## **Learn From Your Mistakes**

I've made so many mistakes; I have forgotten some of them because there were so many. Some I have learned from, some I have had to relearn, and some people had to take me aside and say calmly, "What the hell were you thinking of, or were you thinking at all?" Nobody's perfect, and it takes years and training to learn this trade. I make mistakes now, and I probably will make a lot more, but if I can learn from them, learning is what I can achieve. If you want to learn

sometimes, you have to make mistakes. A foreman told me to try and learn one thing a day. If you can learn more than that, great, but at least try to learn one thing.

### **Conduit, Art Work On Display**

When you walk into the subways, and look up, you'll see endless feet of conduit on display. If it's done well, it's a work of art. You also see conduits in building basements and on the sides of houses and other buildings – endless amounts of conduit, so many bends stacked next to each other or on top of each other, but in unison. It better be level and better look good because it's on display and it represents us.

Big conduit and small conduit is a work of art if it is done well; it's a thing of beauty. Learn this and someday your work will be on display for the world to see. Probably someone will be waiting on a subway platform cursing about why the damn train is taking so long, but he or she might look up at the bends, the kicks, and the offsets and say, "Sweet." If you get really good at doing this kind of work, you'll be a prized commodity at job sites.

### **Don't Take Things For Granted**

When you volunteer your time to go to a children's hospital or participate in other things Local Three does for the community, you see the effects of your time on people's faces, and it's priceless. Besides sometimes learning something, it also makes you feel good about yourself and what you have. I remember when I was a volunteer firefighter a couple of years ago, we would volunteer our time to bring gifts to the children of Saint Mary's in Bayside. Saint Mary's is an eye opener. If you think things are really bad and you are suffering in this economy, go see the children there. It can be heartbreaking, and maybe you will decide to volunteer ore of your time.

### **The Road To ...**

The road of an apprentice is a journey, and not every journey is going to be the same. Every story is different. Some stories just blow you away, some stories sound familiar to your own, and some make you wonder how anyone could have survived. War veterans are some of the calmest people around because they have seen death and lived to see another day. To them, patience is a virtue and every day is precious, and things really don't bother them. They are great under pressure.

Some other people got into the union because they fought in a cause, maybe not in the military but by trying to better the environment or by bringing in unions to their workplaces. I have heard plenty of these stories, and I know how they feel. So you know I will be voting in the fall for the Employee Free Choice Act, so that the people can be really free in taking back this country from the Corporations (Wal-Mart being the worst in America, Coca Cola in South America) that run it now.

### **The Road Through**

Well this one's up to me, and this one's up to you. You have four years of apprenticeship training to learn the trade and two years as a junior mechanic to see if you've got what it takes without blowing yourself up in the process. And that's just the "hands on" part. There are five years of schooling and college thrown in to boot, so when you survive it, you really went through it. You really get out of it what you put into it. They put you through the mill and you conquered it and learned a new trade, so man or lady, now you really do need a drink.

# The Long Journey to Journeyman

**Matthew Roca**

It's hard enough being an electrical apprentice, but it's even harder to become an electrical apprentice. There are many steps to follow in order to even apply for a Local Three apprenticeship. The whole process takes years of anxiously waiting and wondering if you will ever get the call to come into the program. The process took me two years from the day I mailed my application to the day I was actually accepted. For some people it takes much more time than that; some people in my electrical theory class who waited seven or more years. I am one of the lucky ones who got in right after I was finished with college. The timing was perfect.

Whenever I think about apprenticeships, I try to imagine how the idea came to be. I know that in the Middle Ages skilled craftsmen would agree to train a person to do what they do. Wikipedia.org gave me an idea about this: "The system of apprenticeship first developed in the later Middle Ages and came to be supervised by craft guilds and town governments. A master craftsman was entitled to employ young people as an inexpensive form of labor in exchange for providing formal training in the craft. Most apprentices were males, but female apprentices were found in a number of crafts associated with embroidery, silk-weaving, etc. Apprentices would live in the master craftsman's household. Most apprentices aspired to become master craftsmen themselves on completion of their contract (usually a term of seven years), but some would spend time as a journeyman and a significant proportion would never acquire their own workshop" ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).

## Chain of Command

On the job site it's important to remember that there is a chain of command when it comes to people who are "higher up on the food chain" than you. It's almost exactly like the military. The ranking is as follows: The TA-1s are the newbies in the field and have that title until they are officially initiated, which takes at least four months. Above them are the regular apprentices, and above that the journeymen, then the sub foremen, and finally the general foreman, who is like the

general of an army. The workers on the job are like a squad of troops. The enemy forces are the non-union workers that we compete with for work. The casualties of war are the ones that get laid off and pass on to the joint board for another job.

## **The Beginning of the Journey in 2004**

I first decided to try and get into the program when my father asked me if I wanted to send in an application for the electrical apprenticeship program. He mentioned that 2004 was the year that they open up for applications. They do this every four years. I was interested because my father, uncle, and second cousin are all in the union. I was a full-time college student at the time studying political science and didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do when I graduated. The union does not advertise the opening up of the apprenticeship program, so I was fortunate enough to hear about it from family members.

My father was the one who got the application for an official application into the program. The union hall only sends out a certain number of applications, and in order to get one you have to get a set of forms from them, fill the forms out, and return them by registered mail before the deadline. Thousands of requests for applications were sent at the time that I sent mine in. Out of the thousands that they get, they send out a small percentage of official applications about three months later. The forms for each of these steps come in a thick envelope and include a bundle of pages full of requirements. I do not remember everything that was in the application, but I do remember that they needed the original birth certificate as well as official transcripts from every school I had attended my whole life. The application was designed to scan your entire life and see if you were suitable for the electrical apprenticeship, which is an idea that I can understand. There are a lot of bad people out there with bad histories.

Now that I am experiencing the program firsthand, I understand that you do really need a certain amount of intelligence to do a lot of the electrical work. It took me a week to finally get the entire application ready and sent off. About five months later, I got a letter stating that I should come into the union hall to take the aptitude test. This was a written test that scared me more than the SATs. It was about three hours long, and the people running the place were like prison guards. I waited for an hour just to be let in to the auditorium. There were at least a thousand other people there to take the test. We were split up into groups and seated at giant round tables. Inspectors glared down to make sure that we were not cheating. We had to keep

our hands on top of the table at all times. I remember that they had said “no calculators” at least a hundred times when one guy raised his hand and asked, “Can I use my calculator?” That guy got laughed at by the whole room.

The test itself was very stressful. It had everything you could possibly think of. The math sections scared me the most because I had to try desperately to remember things that I had not done in 12 years. Simple fifth and sixth grade math was on it, which is stuff that I once knew but had forgotten. I was able to dig up some old knowledge about some of the math problems on the test.

The rest of the test had questions that I felt were ridiculous. Some sections asked detailed grammatical questions that I had never heard about in my entire life. One question that I remember was: “What is a hyperbole?” I had no idea about what that was and failed to see its relevance. Overall, I think I did a decent job on the test because I got a call for the “interview step” of the application that winter. I have never been so nervous in my life. The night that I had the interview was the toughest part of the whole process.

After waiting for hours, I had to sit at the end of a big table surrounded by people with notes. One person asked me why I wanted to be an electrician. I stuttered a lot but I got through it fine. Almost a year later, I got a letter telling me to come in for a physical, which meant I was unofficially accepted into the program. When I passed my physical with flying colors, I had my orientation a month later. After that two-year process, I was ready to officially start my career as a Local Three electrician.

## **The College Helper Years**

Throughout the course of the application process, I had some experience in the electrical field through the Local itself. The Local has a program known as the college helper program. It’s something that is only available to the immediate family of Local Three members. Throughout the months of June, July, and August, employment as an apprentice is available for college students who have parents in the business. For two summers, I worked as a full-time apprentice on real job sites.

## Applying to Be a Summer Helper

The application process for the summer helper program was a task within itself, almost as annoying as the apprenticeship application. The first thing I had to do was write a letter to the Joint Board stating that I was interested in working as a summer helper. Then I had to go in person to the business agent's office with an official transcript, an official letter stating that I was enrolled in college for the next school year, and my official birth certificate. The first time I applied, I had to go back to the college to get a letter twice because the previous letter wasn't good enough. Luckily, the business agent had a lot of patience with me, and I was accepted.

## Bigman Brothers Electric, Summer of 2005

My first job as a college helper was with Bigman Brothers Electric. They were a small shop based in Long Island City in Queens. The job was a renovation in the old Bloomingdale's on 59th Street between Third Avenue and Lexington. I was very nervous because I had no idea what to expect. I walked onto the job at 6:30 am with my tool bag in my hand and had no idea what floor I was supposed to be working on. After calling the shop and asking the security guards, I finally found out that the job was on the third floor.

After going through a security checkpoint, I took the elevator up and wandered around and asked a guy, who turned out to be a carpenter, "Are there any electricians here?" It turns out that this was a stupid question because electricians work in the same area as the other trades. Honestly, I didn't even know that we worked in the same area as other trades. I had the idea that we did not. I waited around nervously until the foreman showed up a few minutes later. We shook hands and showed each other our union cards.

I did not understand any of the terminology on the job site so I had no idea what a gang box was. A gang box is a big metal container used to store tools and materials. It took me a while to figure that out. I learned everything from scratch. Before I came to the job, the only thing I knew about electrical work was that wires carry electricity. I have come a long way since that time. I remember my first task was to help two guys pull wire from one location to another. I was by the reels, my partner Don was on the ladder feeding the wire into the pipe, and his partner Carl was at the destination pulling. I was not used to this, but I put in a good effort pulling the wires off the reel, which turned out to be tougher than it looked. I felt my muscles

getting weaker just after five minutes. This was going to be a long day. Luckily the wire runs that we were doing were very short and I had plenty of time to rest.

The first thing I learned in the electrical field was to always tie off the end of a dragline coming out of the bucket. Dragline is reinforced string that we use to pull wires through pipes. It is usually packaged in buckets with small openings for the string to come out of. The dragline is all in one continuous coil so if the end of it gets inside the bucket, you'll never find it unless you have the patience to open the bucket and fish it out. It's one of my vivid memories of that job.

As time went on, I came to realize that some guys on the job were more mature than others. Some were nice and some were complete jerks. Some guys acted like they were in high school, and some guys were just plain crazy. One guy on the job was named Jimmy, a funny guy who sometimes got on my nerves because of the things he said and did.

My first coffee run was the most nerve-racking thing I had ever done. I was worried sick about getting everyone's order right. Luckily the deli owner was a nice person who helped me out. When I got back and finished my coffee, Jimmy would take my list when I wasn't looking so that I couldn't figure out anyone's change. When I look back on the situation it's funny, but at the time I was upset and a little ticked off.

## **Lessons Learned**

My time with Bigman Brothers was only seven weeks but I learned a lot. Throughout that summer, I learned the basics of the electrical industry. I learned what the different color wires stood for and how electricity works. I learned about the things I was not supposed to do, like ask people if they wanted their change back, even if it was a dollar. I learned what a BX connector<sup>1</sup> was and how to use my tools. I even learned about the politics on the job and the hierarchy of the shop and the workers. As I learned how to do things and complete the work, I realized that I enjoyed doing electrical work.

## **Five Star Electric, Summer of 2006**

It was the beginning of summer 2006 when I got the call to be a summer helper for the second time. I was excited about it because I had done it once before and enjoyed it. I got the job ticket from the hall and got my tools ready for work the next day. The job was on

Leonard Street and Broadway and was different from the last job I'd been on. It was a brand new 20-floor luxury apartment building that was two years behind schedule. The whole job seemed familiar to me even though it was a different place and shop, so I knew what to expect. The first thing I did was BX apartments<sup>2</sup> with two female journeymen. It was fun for a while, but the heat made it almost unbearable. The inside of the place was like an oven.

Unfortunately, the summer of 2006 was one of the hottest summers in a while. One week it was over 100 degrees for about four days. The one good thing that came out of this was that I got to experience some of the hardships of the job like having your legs hurt from running up and down stairs, dealing with harsh weather, and continuing to be productive despite all of this. I developed important coping skills that helped me get through it.

### **Day One: Solar Electrical Systems 2007**

My first day on the job as an apprentice at Solar Electric Systems was stressful even though I had an idea about what to expect because of the summer helper program that I had already done twice. I had my full bag of tools and was ready for work. I kept looking at my job ticket nervously making sure I was heading to the right address. My first job was at 10 Barclay Street right off of Park Row and City Hall, a block away from Ground Zero. The job was inside of a newly constructed condominium tower that was exactly 60 floors high including the multi-tiered roof. I was nervous and excited at the same time. It took me a half hour to actually find the foreman's shanty.<sup>3</sup> It did not take long for me to get used to my surroundings and start learning. The two things that I learned very quickly were the politics of the job and the actual trade itself.

### **B&G Electric**

A few months after I started working at Solar Electric, I was laid off. Solar Electric was a small shop that was shrinking, and there was no more work. This kind of thing is only part of the business, so I went back to the Joint Board for a new job. I was fortunate because if apprentices got laid off, they could get a new job the very next day. The next day I was working for B&G Electric. They were a big shop that did mostly big box stores like Home Depots, Targets, and supermarkets. The job was located in the heart of Flatbush, Brooklyn, which was not the best neighborhood in the world. It was a huge three-

story Target store between Flatbush Avenue and Nostrand Avenue. As I stepped on each job, I began to build confidence and become more confident in my work.

### **One Year Down and 40 to Go: 2008**

So far the best job I was on was the T-Mobile store that we built on Greenwich Street downtown. It was just me and the foreman doing all the electrical work in the entire place. I learned more on this job than I did in the year I had been an apprentice prior to that. I did pipe work on my own, operated scissor lifts,<sup>4</sup> and had to figure out how to figure things out on my own. I had a lot of fun on the job. It's a shame that the job ended in a month. Towards the end, the job got extremely crazy and many of the trades were practically tripping over each other trying to get the job done. I installed all the emergency signs and the rest of the lights in the back of the store as fast as I could. I had just come back from my vacation, so I was not fully used to this fast pace. In the midst of the mayhem, I almost got seriously shocked. I was installing an emergency exit sign in the back area of the store and didn't know that the wires coming out of the ceiling box were live.

As I slipped on the base ring<sup>5</sup> of the exit sign, the two wires hit the back of my hand and the current traveled across my skin. Luckily, I was grounded; if I had been touching metal, then the current would have traveled through my body and could have possibly killed me. It was a circuit that was "not supposed to be on." It was one of the strangest feelings that anyone could ever experience. It almost felt like someone quickly stabbed me with a pointed object. It made me yell not because it hurt, but because it startled me. The current travels so fast it is almost unbelievable.

I haven't been hit seriously with electricity yet. I hope that it never happens, but I know that it probably will. I learned a valuable lesson that day: Never trust completely what your journeyman says because he or she could be wrong about whether or not wire is live, and that mistake could cost you your life. I bought a proximity tester the next weekend so that I could avoid something like this from happening again. The tester is a small wand that beeps and flashes when it senses current flowing through a conductor.

## Another Year Wiser: 2009

I have now been on a total of ten jobs since I have started my apprenticeship about two years ago. My present job is very interesting. We are renovating a couple of floors of the Fox News Building on Sixth Avenue between 46th and 47th Street. The name of the shop is Inner City Electric and from what I hear, it's a decent shop. My sub foreman said that the shop is always late paying benefits for the workers, but it isn't too serious. I like most of the people on the job except for a few that seem to enjoy being jerks. I worked with an angry old Polish guy for a while until I couldn't take him constantly yelling at me for nothing. What a pain in the ass that guy was. I found out that he recently got arrested for beating his wife, and when he got out, he got arrested again for violating a restraining order that she had put out on him.

## Politics of the Job

### 1. Etiquette

It's important to understand the politics and etiquette of the job site along with the trade itself. Going into the job blind and clueless may get you yelled at from time to time. One time I got yelled at for helping a carpenter for just a moment. He had asked me to hold a string while he pulled it across the floor to lay out the wall. I had no idea that I wasn't supposed to do this; I was just trying to be nice. I'm not the type of person who'll say "no" when people ask for simple favors. I guess being nice can get you into trouble sometimes. The worst thing you can do on a job is complain. That will destroy anyone's reputation and may possibly expose them to merciless ridicule. I have seen it with my own eyes.

### 2. Vices

There are a lot of vices that journeymen are not supposed to have, but some people indulge in these vices anyway. These may include drinking on the job, leaving early for lunch or home, or taking a long coffee break. Unfortunately, I have done at least one of these things once in the two years that I have been an apprentice electrician. I admit that I have left early for lunch on occasion, but that was because my journeyman left also.

I have seen people who have drug or alcohol problems drink on the job. At one job, the guys would go to the bar every Friday. It was fun the first couple of times, but I don't see myself drinking that often. The first time I went to a bar with my crew, I saw my sub foreman there also.

One Friday, I was working with a guy that we all called "Crazy John Doe." I was starting to think he really was crazy because of the way he would act. Both of us were installing microwaves all day at the time. His work ethic on Friday was to work as fast as possible so that we could coast through the afternoon. That meant that I had to hustle while he yelled out orders in the background. I took some huge things out of the gang box myself and lifted them into place just underneath the kitchen cabinets. The objects I lifted were so heavy that I was lucky that I did not hurt myself. Semi-jokingly, I said, "Hey, this paper on the microwave says that two people need to install these," so Crazy John Doe immediately took out his lighter and tried to set the paper on fire.

I know a normal person would never do something like that, but I guess that's why they called him Crazy John Doe. Eventually the days like that ended. John Doe was transferred, and I got laid off a few weeks later for reduction. The crew of 50 guys was quickly downsizing. A few months later, I heard that Crazy John Doe was laid off from another job, but he never stopped showing up to hang out with the guys. When he wouldn't leave, the foreman had to threaten to call the police on him. From that moment on, I realized why they called him Crazy John Doe. He was crazy.

## **The Future**

When I finish the apprenticeship, I will be 27 years old. I have a long way to go before that day comes. I think about the number of classes that I have yet to take and cringe. I have a few more years of tests and homework. One good thing is that I have only one more semester of college left at SUNY Empire State College. I will miss some aspects of the college, but it's important to move forward.

My job-related work is another aspect of my schooling' and I am trying my best to learn as much as I can so that when I do become a journeyman, I will be well prepared and ready for any task. Sometimes I worry that I am not learning enough on the job, so I strive to ask as many questions as possible when I work with a journeyman.

## All in All

The journey to journeyman is a long one. If I pass all my classes when I am supposed to, I will have spent five and a half years preparing to graduate from being an apprentice. That's almost as long as it takes to become a doctor or lawyer. I am currently a second-year apprentice coming up on my third year, and I think I am becoming more aware of what I have to do on the job. So far, I am doing well in the program and have not failed anything. If I keep this up, then I will become a journeyman, and then the real journey begins.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A small metal connector that holds the end of an armored cable into a junction box or device.
- <sup>2</sup> Slang phrase for pulling armored cables (BX) for outlets and switches in an unfinished wall.
- <sup>3</sup> Temporary shelter for workers on a job site.
- <sup>4</sup> A motorized battery-charged cart that has threads that expand upward.
- <sup>5</sup> A metal ring that goes in front of the wire box that gives a base for the exit sign to connect to.

# Happiness is being an Electrician: Following in the Footsteps of my Father

John Ciorra

**E**ver since I was a kid, I have been fascinated by the way that mechanical things function and are made. My dad had a repair shop and fixed electronic things like TVs, VCRs, radios, washers, dryers, dishwashers, and air conditioners. I often watched my dad repair an appliance that other technicians couldn't fix, even if he never seen it before.

When my dad was at work, he would often let me sit at his side and use a screwdriver to open the backs of appliances or TVs. Sometimes I even went with him on service calls. I always thought I would be working side by side with him at his shop as I grew older.

But by the time I entered junior high school, my dad's business was failing, not for his lack of talent, but for a lack of business. Our country had become quite the "throw away" society, and people would rather buy a new appliance from a big store like PC Richards on credit than pay cash to repair a good unit.

## Construction With My Other Family

As my dad's repair shop failed, my dad began hating his business and made me promise I would not follow him into it. Then, when I was in high school, my best friend Tino asked me to work with him and his father on weekends doing construction. Tino's dad had a large construction company and was trying to groom Tino to take over the company when his dad retired.

Working for Tino's dad got me hooked on construction work, so Tino and I registered for a co-op program in our school where we worked and learned about construction at the local farm museum.

## After School, Then What?

After high school, I went to college to get a degree, and I still worked construction on the weekends and on every holiday. Tino's dad's company was doing very well, and I thought it would be a good place for me to work.

I got my BBA, a bachelor of business administration with a major in business management. I thought I could use it to help me get my own construction business going. But other things happened, and in the end I took the first job that I could get, which was managing a car rental company. This was about as far away from construction as you could get.

After that, I moved around a lot from job to job until I finally returned to my real interests by working in the construction rental equipment industry. Once again, I had the urge to get back into construction.

## Back Into A Family Business

At the same time, I met my new fiancé's brother who was an electrician. As he told me a story about his work, I found myself really interested in finding out more about becoming an electrician. After we had a long talk, my fiancé's brother agreed to help me get an interview with the Brotherhood, which is very hard to join. You have to "know" someone to apply and be accepted.

I passed the interview, and the rest is history. As a union electrician, I have found a home that combines my past interest in tinkering with electronics with my love of construction.

## Places Where I Have Worked

I have worked for only two companies during the two years that I have been working with the Union, but those two companies have taught me a lot.

The first company was Unity Electric, where I worked on several interesting projects. Unity is one of the five largest companies working with the Local Three. From what I understand, Unity also works internationally and has contracts with other corporations where they work abroad, even in Europe.

I have seen Unity jobs in New Jersey and Long Island locations that are just as big as the one where I work in the City. Because Unity is so big, it deals in every aspect of the electrical field, from residential work to power distribution, data work, fiber optics, and huge commercial applications.

At Unity, I did everything from basic lighting to working on the construction of a Jet Blue terminal at JFK Airport, which required pulling wire for high voltage panels and mounting transformers. That same week I also ran speaker wire for a sound system, which was the first time I bent pipe or “conduit” both rigid and EMT. I used a side winder as well, which is an electric and hydraulic bender for two inch or larger pipe. Many of these job experiences are not available for apprentices during their first year or two of work, but Unity was so busy and had so much work that I didn’t stop moving or learning every day. Each new day brought a different assignment and something else to learn.

The other company I worked for is called All-Nu Electric, so I call it my “All-Nu Experience.” As described by its name, this company is less than two years old and has about ten employees. They handle small to medium jobs such as handling store fronts and doing building maintenance.

## **Coworkers**

During my two years of work, I haven’t found anyone that I haven’t liked in the Union; even the teachers in school are great. This wasn’t true in my previous jobs and has surprised me. The electrical industry is full of great people and some really interesting characters.

There was one who could have been a Joe Pesce clone and even sounded like him. Working with him was a lot of fun and made me laugh all day.

Everyone seems to have a specialty here in the Union. One guy may be talented in a “specialty” like many doctors are. For example, Will can do panels and circuitry even blindfolded. He is amazing. Danny can not only bend pipe, but he intuitively knows just how to bend it without measuring as he goes. Mark is a whiz at troubleshooting problems and almost automatically knows what has gone wrong with a job. John P. is a master of doing heavy work like mounting transformers and heavy switch gear. It has been amazing and invaluable that all of these guys have taken the time to show us apprentices their skills after years of work and of insight.

## Interesting Characters

For some strange reason, at the airport especially, everyone has a nickname. I was called “Oxyman” because people thought I looked like the Oxyclean commercial spokesperson.

One journeyman, Frank Batista, was called “Frankie Batts” because of his name and because he’s on the union softball team and insists on bringing his own bats to games.

Paulie “Bag of Doughnuts” was forever munching from a bag of doughnuts that he dragged around with him whatever chance he got.

“The Great Pumpkin” was a big guy named Rob. Since I started working with him in the wintertime and it was cold, he always wore a bright, safety-orange colored sweatshirt to keep warm.

Adam Mass’ name might not sound funny, but if you say it fast, it sounds like “AdumbAss.” That poor guy has had the same nickname for a long time.

Pete Moffitt was known as “No Profit Moffitt” because he was a foreman who would get the job done for the bosses, but he would also grab all the overtime he could. That’s how he sucked up all the profits.

## Tools You GOTTA Have

Although there are many tools we need for our work, there are three that we must always carry: linemen’s pliers, a screw driver, and electrical tape. Electrical tape is not “officially” a tool, but a good apprentice always carries it.

I also like to carry a ten-in-one screwdriver due to its versatility. It carries several different kinds of tips in several sizes and includes a couple of sockets to hold the special bits. This one tool does the job of many. Similarly, a linesman’s pliers can cut wire, but they can also tighten bolts and nuts, strip and splice wire, and serve as an impromptu hammer, which is particularly useful.

Many people get yelled at for forgetting these tools, although they are the first tools you put on in the morning. You might also carry many more job-specific tools depending upon the day’s work.

Of the hundred or so tools that we carry depending on the job, these are a few of the more popular: slip joint pliers, a keyhole saw, needle nose pliers, wire strippers, a tape measure, a level, a flashlight, a hammer, a wooden ruler, nut drivers, open-end ratchets, and many others.

## **Now Why The Heck Aren't They Blinking???**

When people find out that you are an electrician, even just an apprentice, they always ask for your help. This includes your family. For example, every year my dad and I get the job of putting up the outdoor Christmas lights at our house.

This is usually an enjoyable job, especially when the weather is nice. We usually put them up in early November before the weather gets colder. This year was an exception, because we didn't start the job until it was quite cold outside.

My job is to test the lights and get them ready to hang. After I did that, we hung the lights up and everything was set for the big revelation, which was a big disappointment. Half the lights came on, and the other half didn't. I was frozen, it was midnight, and half the lights were dark.

I checked and rechecked the whole system of lights and wires and found that nothing was missing and that there were no missing or burnt-out bulbs. When I walked back into the house, I was annoyed and angry and ready to tear the lights down. My father finished his cup of coffee, went outside, and came back inside five minutes later laughing. His son, the electrician, had forgotten one thing: One extension cord was not plugged in all the way.

I got teased the whole of Christmas, and soon the whole family knew. I will never live it down. Sometimes it stinks to be the son. I can't wait until I can give this job to my own son.

## **Being A Newbie Apprentice**

My first job as an apprentice started on 2/15/07, a cold winter day after a Valentine's Day ice storm. I was supposed to work in the Jet Blue terminal at JFK airport in Terminal Five. Before we get to a new workplace, we have to report to the joint board to get our work ticket, or as many journeymen say, you have to go to the "JIB for a JOB." I got my ticket to report to Jet Blue, and my journey began.

The ticket had the foreman's contact information, including his name and cell phone number. I was supposed to call the foreman to find out the job and the job site, including specifics such as the exact location, parking, and public transportation.

When I left the joint board, I called my foreman, not knowing what to expect. Keri, the foreman's secretary, answered the phone and told me that the foreman Dave was busy in a meeting with the general contractor. She asked if she could help me. I explained that

I was a TA1 (a first year apprentice) and was supposed to come to the job site the next day and that tomorrow would be my first day as an apprentice, ever. She explained that the new job site was “not too bad” with plenty of parking spaces and told me where they were and how to get to the terminal. Then she giggled and said that I would be working in the terminal.

When she said that I’d be working in the terminal, I assumed it was IN the terminal, so the next morning I dressed in normal clothes, not cold weather stuff. I had a normal shirt and jeans on with a normal winter jacket.

I got to the parking lot and then on to a bus, and then I began to notice that several of the other passengers were wearing heavy cold weather gear. I was surprised when they got out at my “stop,” but when I saw the “terminal,” my jaw dropped. It was completely out in the open, and the temperature was cold, 13 degrees, with a wind chill of below zero. Also, since we were at the airport, a heavy wind was blowing off the water and across open fields and then directly into the terminal. I got so cold that day that my toes did not feel normal until much later. It felt warmer outside in the air than inside the terminal. With no windows and built of concrete, it felt like the building held the cold in.

When I got to the foreman’s trailer and introduced myself, I saw Keri behind her desk with the rest of the foremen and the straws (subforemen). They looked at me and asked if I had brought any more clothing with me besides what I was wearing. I said “unfortunately not” because I thought I would be working inside the terminal.

They all started to laugh at me, but after a few minutes, they seemed to feel bad about it and apologized. Actually, months later a few of them still joked with me about it.

After all that, I was assigned to Sonny, a journeyman, to work outside putting up exterior lighting in the jetway. The only good thing about that job was that we needed a bucket truck to reach the top of the jetway, and when the work got a little slow, Sonny let me sit in the truck with the heat blasting. Thank God for Sonny.

This is a good example of how TA1s are treated at first. Every apprentice has to go through a “break in” period. They get a lot of teasing and a lot of the most boring and crummy jobs.

## **Getting To Know My Bosses**

As the days passed, my bosses realized that I was older than the other apprentices at my job site and had a family, and they began to treat me differently. For example, I wasn't required to unload deliveries unless they were huge and required every hand. I was respected for my age, and the "kids" were sent to do the dirty work. The younger apprentices sometimes did work that I should have done because even though I was older, I was sometimes less experienced than they were.

## **Yup, Trust The Older Guy**

As an apprentice you are not allowed to be in a live electric closet, even up to your 5.5 year mark. Before you take your "A" test, you are not allowed to touch live electricity. But since I was older, I was allowed to work with more experienced electricians when they were working with live electricity. The other "kids" were never even allowed to see inside the closet.

So I am glad in a way that I am an older apprentice, because I get a lot more hands-on experience and more respect. I don't have as much time to waste as a young apprentice does, so I am very glad for the extra job experience that I get.

## **Does A Coffee Break Ever Last 15 Minutes?**

Maybe it's just luck, but I have yet to experience a mere 15 minute coffee break.

For example, during my job at the Jet Blue Terminal, we would gather up our tools on our Rubbermaid carts at about 8:45 am and then walk to the shanty.

The shanty is a place where the electricians all hang out to drink coffee, and it stores our tools and materials. Basically, it's a mobile office. At Jet Blue, we bent pipes to form a little "tent" and put pads of building insulation on buckets inside to make some handy seats. Our Jet Blue shanty also had portable heaters to warm us from the 10 degree temps in the building.

After we got to the shanty with our carts, we would walk to a place where we could buy coffee, and by time we'd returned, it was 9:15 am and the 15 minute break should have ended. Instead, that's when our real coffee break started, and it was 30 or 45 minutes until we returned to the work site, maybe around 10 a.m. Then by the time we got our equipment together and started to work, more time passed.

Soon it would be lunchtime, when the theory of the “long lunch” was taught to me. Our lunch was supposed to be from 12:30 to 1, and it was home at 2. What a long day, huh?

## **The Good Life, All You Can Eat!**

Of course, on most days we try to work on some form of schedule, because otherwise no work would get done. But when the work on a jobsite is slow, people tend to take longer breaks. I think I have been lucky to have been on job sites that weren’t that slow, but I have heard of guys leaving for lunch and not coming back until it was time to quit for the day.

I did work once for a company where we did maintenance work that was very slow. When we finished our work very early, we all went out to lunch together. I have eaten at some of New York’s greatest restaurants: “The Old Homestead” Steakhouse, “Hawaiian Tropic,” “Bobby Van’s Steakhouse,” the “Mulberry Street Pub,” “Juniors,” “Peter Luggers,” and “Ferdinando’s Foccociaria.”

How could a mere apprentice afford such extravagance? All I ever had to do was to leave a tip. The guys say that when I am a journeyman, I will have to pay it forward to my apprentices. This is the way that the way the old timers work; you always take care of your apprentice.

I am so glad to be an apprentice with such a great group of people. Traditionally, the apprentice is seen as someone you kick around. Yes there is teasing, and some ribbing still, but they teach you a lot, and you benefit from their knowledge and their own job experience, and yes, their generosity as well.

## **A Story Of Electrical Mishaps: “Always Test Your Tester.”**

This is a valuable lesson that everyone should remember, so let me explain. I worked with a man named Bobby at the Jet Blue Terminal. Bobby was a journeyman with 40 years of experience and was the best worker on the project. He was then about 65 years old and had a few weeks until retirement. Everyone wanted a long, successful career like Bobby had.

When I first became an apprentice, I was told, “Kid, always test your tester.” They were talking about a proximity tester, an instrument that test wires to see if they are “live” (that carry a live electrical current). No one should ever work on a live wire.

On a Thursday like any other, an hour before quitting time, Bobby crawled into a ceiling after his last break of the day and grabbed his tester out of his work belt to test the wires near him. Noticing that his tester's indicator light did not turn on, he began to cut the wire, and his pliers blew up in his hand because the wires were live. Bobby had forgotten to test his tester, and it had malfunctioned. But Bobby was fortunate, because if he had cut a wire with a higher voltage or stronger current, he could have been retired permanently.

### **Raul's Rush**

I have a friend Danny who was working in a union shop that had a few non-union electricians, and one of them was a friend named Raul.

Many people said that Raul was dangerous. Non-union employees are said to have a certain mindset, always in a rush to get more work done in the shortest amount of time to try to earn more money.

Raul was always in a rush and worked like the energizer bunny, which can be commendable, but this is also something that we are taught not to do. Safety comes first. Raul would take chances, like working on live circuits and missing some safety checks to get more work done. This was his habit, and one day it came back to haunt him.

Raul had been complaining about problems with his flashlight, but he didn't want to take the time to find fresh batteries for it. He just wanted to get the job done quickly.

Danny was working down the hall from Raul, and they were running BX cable in the ceiling. Raul had removed a ceiling tile and had started looking for a good place to run wire to Danny. Danny called to Raul and then heard a scream. When Danny ran to Raul's side, he discovered his friend lying on the floor; the smell of burning flesh will haunt him for years. Raul had a silver dollar-sized hole burnt into the back of his hand.

Raul had hit an open circuit box that had wires spliced without the wire nut attached. A wire nut is something that goes over the splice to protect it and make it safe from shorting or making contact with anything else. When Raul was feeling around in the semi darkness, his hand came into contact with the spliced wire and met 277 volts. Only god knows what the current was.

If Raul hadn't rushed and just gotten the flashlight batteries, a five-minute difference, he would have seen the open box and saved himself weeks of recuperation. The moral of the story: Don't rush safety and don't ignore your tools, because it could cost you your life.

## **Conclusions**

Happiness is being an electrician, providing you remember the basic lessons I have learned. Test your tester. A prepared apprentice is always good. As a journeyman, I must pay it forward and take care of my apprentices, especially the older ones. Of course, you must always bring the proper clothing and use the right tool for the job.