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WOMEN SUCCEEDING IN GREEN JOBS

Green careers are the careers of the 21st century. Every day, more women are choosing to go green in their careers and are finding satisfying jobs that will enable them to provide for themselves and their families. They are making the move for a variety of reasons and taking advantage of green career opportunities in every part of the country. In this chapter, profiles of a diverse set of women who are working and succeeding in a variety of green careers are presented. Read their stories, and then begin the work of creating your own!

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PROFILES

CLAUDIA MLADOSICH

Occupation: Small Firms Energy Auditor, Association for Energy Affordability

Location: South Bronx, New York

Education: Attended community college; Building Performance Institute certification



Claudia Mladovich grew up watching repairmen fix things in her home and noticed that they weren't always doing quality work. She also noticed that women weren't taught skills that they need to do their own repairs. It was that realization that spurred her interest in learning and eventually led her to a career in the green economy.

Claudia is now a certified small firms energy auditor for the Association for Energy Affordability, a nonprofit training and technical services organization that offers weatherization services to low- and moderate-income families and communities. She performs energy inspections on homes and other buildings in the South Bronx. She examines their walls, ceilings, doors, foundations, roofs, and chimneys looking for points of energy loss. "I like being able to help people on the nuts and bolts level," she said. "It's like building science. You are the scientist and you're not just looking at it like everyone else."

Claudia's career path took many turns. She had previous experience working on homes and in information technology. She worked in the solar energy field for a while, but as the mother of two children, she found that the hours didn't allow her enough time with her family.

Her next step was to start looking into green careers more deeply. She did a lot of Internet research, read extensively about the fields in which she was interested, and took classes at the local community college, where she became Building Performance Institute (BPI) certified.

Sheer determination helped her land her current position. "I knew I wanted to work here because they have a lab for building controls for remote sensing projects. I knew I wouldn't get that experience at any other company," Claudia noted. "I called every day for two months."

Claudia believes that there are opportunities for other women interested in green careers and now is a good time to get involved. As you begin planning for a green career, do your research first, she advised. "Read articles and look into the aspects of the job that you're interested in. Determine the education you need and take action," she said. She is always looking for opportunities to advance in her own career by taking more classes in other green areas and seeking new responsibilities on the job. "To succeed, I need to educate myself continually. I know I have a lot of experience, but I would like to get a degree someday.

"As the field grows, you'll have more opportunities for different types of work. So stick your toes in the water. Don't limit yourself — do a little bit of dreaming," she said. "This is a really fun time to be in the field. Everyone is excited, and, in the next five years, it will be a big deal."

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DONELE WILKINS

Occupation: Former Executive Director, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice

Location: Detroit, Michigan

Education: Attended college; seminars, training, and certification programs



Donele Wilkins takes satisfaction in helping make the city of Detroit cleaner and healthier — and in putting people to work. She believes everyone has a right to clean air, and every child the right to a playground free from pollution.

Donele is the founder and former executive director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (DWEJ), a nonprofit organization that has been working since 1994 to empower individuals and groups to address the city's environmental concerns.

“I like to say I’m a born advocate,” Donele said. “I spent a great deal of my early professional life working to ensure that workers were healthy and safe on the job. I’m very motivated by the need to clean up our community environmentally, and those transferrable skills have been really helpful.”

For Donele, the inspiration to create an organization to fight for environmental justice came in 1991 at the first People of Color Environmental Summit in Washington, D.C. As she listened, she became acutely aware of the “environmental destruction” taking place in communities across the country.

Since its founding, DWEJ has grown from an all-volunteer group to an organization with 14 employees. It has advocated for the cleanup of contaminated land and against illegal dumping. It has trained thousands of citizens in community hazard awareness and organized Youth on Patrol Against Pollution.

Donele is especially excited about a 16-week jobs training program she launched in 2007 to prepare people for jobs in the green economy. The project focuses on the hard-to-employ and the chronically unemployed. It has led to jobs paying an average of \$14.50 an hour with benefits. The placement rate is 90 percent. “Once our training is complete, [participants] are licensed and certified in a variety of areas that will help them become competitive in the job market,” she noted. In one case, an employer hired half the class even before they graduated.

Donele acknowledges that her organization’s success hasn’t come easily. Raising money was a challenge, and she had other jobs while she was getting it started. She works long hours, and as a single mother when her children were growing up, she struggled to balance family and professional obligations. Her sisters and her mother helped with child care.

But over time, DWEJ has survived, prospered, and expanded. Recently, Donele received approval from the state of Michigan to create the Institute for Innovative Industries, a for-profit school that will expand her capacity to provide education and training. “Take the risk that’s out there, and believe that there is an opportunity for you. I can’t imagine a better time,” she said. “I have to think this is like the onset of the technology era. We have to find answers and solutions to these problems, and there will be opportunity for businesses to take off.”

Wilkins believes that with public attention focusing on issues such as global warming and climate change, the timing is perfect for other women to join the green economy.

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TARA WEBB

Occupation: Apprentice Inside Electrician

Location: Portland, Oregon

Education: Attended college; enrolled in apprentice training

At age 27, Tara Webb has installed solar panels in the largest project in the Pacific Northwest. She's climbed 300-foot towers to wire windmills. She's working hard and making good money, and she is excited about her life and her future.

Growing up, Tara said, it never occurred to her to consider a career in the building trades. "The idea of a female in the trades. ... In high school, we were never told about that. They never told you it was a possibility," she recalled. Tara, who lives in Portland, Oregon, is an apprentice inside electrician who already has substantial electrical installation work experience in the growing renewable energy industry. She's earning more money than she did while working in a loan office, managing stores, or as an assistant bar manager, and she has good benefits as well.

Tara attended college for a couple of years, while holding a variety of jobs, before moving to Oregon. Then one day, when she was taking a bus to work at a bakery, she saw a sign advertising Oregon Tradeswomen, a nonprofit organization that helps women enter the trades. Before long, she signed up for a seven-week pre-apprenticeship training program and earned a certification that helped her land a job as an electric materials handler, which involved moving materials and ordering supplies. After a year in that job, in 2007 she entered a highly competitive International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 48 Inside Electrician apprenticeship program, which takes five years to complete.

Her training and work experience has been broad, but she has especially enjoyed work in green-related fields, such as solar and wind. She went to work on a large-scale construction project to build 70 windmills. About 100 people were on the job at its peak. She was the only woman, and she didn't get a chance to work on the towers until she filled in for a worker who had to attend to family matters. "It was very overwhelming at first, and in the beginning, they weren't too sure about me. Being a female, they weren't sure if I was going to be able to do some of the work and climb the towers," she stated. "I ended up just kicking butt. They said, 'You know what, you are doing so well, we are going to keep you. That other guy, he's not doing it anymore.'"

Tara said that after she completes her apprenticeship, she hopes to specialize in green-related work. "When I tell journeymen who have been in this trade for 15 or 20 years that I have had this much renewable energy experience, they are blown away," she noted. "They say they would love to have that." Tara said she believes strongly in helping to protect the environment. "It's where my heart is. We are surrounded by energy, everywhere we look, everywhere we go. With the demands on the planet increasing, we need to start supplementing our lives with something that's not limited, oil-based or otherwise."

Tara said the trades open up great opportunities for women. "It's going to be a wonderful career for anybody who has the desire and commitment and capability to just go after something," she remarked. "If you enjoy using your hands, if you enjoy using your mind, the trades are a wonderful place to be."

NATALYA CALLEJA

Occupation: President and Chief Executive Officer, The Green Consulting Firm

Location: Tampa, Florida

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration;
green classes and certifications

Natalya Calleja combined her experience and education in business with new environmental skills and credentials to launch a career as a certified green consultant and carbon accountant.



Natalya is president and chief executive officer of the business she founded, The Green Consulting Firm. The firm helps businesses, schools, and other organizations find ways to operate in a more environmentally-friendly way and improve their financial bottom line at the same time. “We come in and train and help implement policies to make sure the carbon footprint is measured, and recommend changes or retrofits that should be done, where investments should be going,” she said. “Then we track their success.”

When working with schools, for instance, Natalya typically starts by creating a four-person green committee to help develop a plan and educate and train staff, parents, and students. The team then mobilizes to inspire and bring about change. The changes can include such things as regulating classroom temperatures, engaging students in recycling, and learning to become a “zero-waste school.” Additional actions can include composting, discontinuing the use of Styrofoam products in cafeterias, and using less paper.

Natalya, who is married and has two children, has degrees in business administration. She had been working in marketing in the corporate world for more than a decade before her career change. She had long had an interest in environmentalism, and this interest grew along with her family. “It really becomes a concern when you have children,” she said. “You’re not only worrying about [getting them to] college, you are worrying about the environment that they are going to have 20 years from today.”

Yet deciding on a green career was just the beginning. Natalya knew she needed new green expertise to complement her business and marketing education and experience. She went to the Internet to research the types of credentials she would need and where to get them. She found classes available at the University of Florida and Miami Dade College, and she gained certifications through Miami Dade, the Green Business League, and other organizations. Since she was retraining herself while still holding down a job and raising a family, she found it most convenient to take vocational and community college classes online. Her coursework included areas such as carbon accounting and risk management. “Honestly, the retraining is continuous because the green technology is constantly evolving,” she noted.

Natalya said that green career opportunities are growing as businesses seek ways to become more profitable by adopting sustainable business practices. That has created demand for energy auditors, carbon accountants, and renewable energy experts. Some companies turn to consultants like herself, while others hire their own sustainability officers to oversee their efforts to go green.

“Women should definitely be considering this type of career. It’s a great career. It’s satisfying,” she stated. “People in this field are passionate, they are open to networking, and they support and help each other. This is by far the best of anything I’ve done in my life.”

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SUSAN SOUTHARD

Occupation: Soil Scientist, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Location: Davis, California

Education: Bachelor's degree in soil science; graduate-level coursework



Susan Southard is passionate about soil. For more than 30 years, she's worked in the field, the lab, and the office quantifying, analyzing, and interpreting soil types. Currently, she's playing a key role in an inventory of the soils of all the National Park Service properties. "When you think about it, food comes from soil, our houses sit on soil, we walk on soil, and from the National Park perspective, when you go to a park, the park landscapes you enjoy are covered with different soils," she said. "Soil's interconnectivity with everything that we do and everything that is alive is inspiring to me."

Susan, who lives and works in Davis, California, says her career as a soil scientist has allowed her to follow her passion, work actively outdoors, make a good living, and make a difference in protecting the environment. She recommends it as a great green career for other women to pursue. Soil scientists can find job opportunities, both in the private and public sectors, providing information critical to making good land-use decisions. Susan also noted that work schedules in the federal government are more flexible than when she started her career, allowing women to balance their careers and family needs.

As a student at the University of Rhode Island, Susan knew she wanted to study science, but wasn't sure which science field to pursue. After an introductory soil science class, she had the answer — studying soil combined biology, chemistry, geology, and other sciences. "Soil science is a very applied science that made sense to me," she noted. "Since I also had a passion for outdoor activity, it was just a natural fit." She earned a bachelor's degree in soil science and was on her way.

Susan has conducted soil field work in Utah, North Carolina, California, and other states. She has taken graduate-level classes to update her knowledge and skills. Now, she is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service's liaison with the National Park Service. Her role is to help facilitate the soil mapping of 272 national parks, monuments, and historic sites, and to help park managers use the soil data successfully. These soil surveys provide for better management of park roads, trails, and camping sites and help protect plant and animal species. The surveys also provide data about the amount of carbon stored in all the different soils, important information in the study of climate change.

"I've always been interested in conservation, whether we talk about conserving energy or conserving soil and water," stated Susan, who is married to a soil professor and has two grown daughters. "My whole focus and career have been based on understanding soils and helping others understand that we need to conserve them, preserve them, and use them sustainably."

Susan thinks this is a great time for women to enter the field because many veteran soil scientists will be retiring in the next several years. "There is going to be a definite need for people who are interested in soils, and definitely the opportunities for women are there. And if a woman doesn't necessarily like to work outside all the time, she probably won't have to, as the job duties have widened and have a greater diversity of activities."

Her advice to women considering green jobs: Follow your passion. "If your job is your passion, you're never going to be dissatisfied with it," she said.

LEAH CARTER

Occupation: Chief Executive Officer, Better for Babies

Location: Carrollton, Georgia

Education: Bachelor's degree in philosophy; graduate work in philosophy



As a young mother studying in Wales, Leah Carter used cloth diapers for her infant son and sometimes shipped Scottish-brand diapers back to the United States for her friends. Today, she runs Better for Babies, a small business that manufactures organic cloth diapers and sells them over the Internet and in 200 stores around the country.

Leah runs her green business from home, which has been especially important to her because her husband has a degenerative neurological illness. “The reason to start the business was so that I had the opportunity to provide income while being home with him and with our son, because my husband needed care at home in the day, and what mother doesn’t want to spend more time with her newborn?” she said.

“We are very passionate about environmental issues, and keeping natural fibers against our baby’s skin,” Leah noted. “It was a very good match with our passion, our lifestyle, and our need for an alternative, flexible source of income.”

The company began small. As it grew, she decided to open up a manufacturing facility in town, located just a few minutes from her home, “in order to get more daily control over the production and quality and what we were making and when.”

She began attending meetings at the Burson Center, a business incubator in Carrollton, and she found a mentor from Georgia Tech through a business-to-business program funded by the state to help small entrepreneurial businesses. He met with her almost weekly for the first year or so, helping her to develop business strategies, find a location for her manufacturing facility, and identify useful classes in manufacturing.

“I received a lot of guidance in making business decisions to manage growth in a smart and efficient way,” Leah said. The mentor helped steer her to the Georgia Green Loans Program when she was facing challenges with the timing of payments to suppliers and from customers.

She networks by attending business meetings locally and through a trade association called the Real Diaper Industry Association she joined a couple of years ago. In September 2009, she was elected president. She uses Twitter and Facebook as social networking tools to build her customer base.

Leah acknowledges it’s a constant challenge to balance business and family, but she enjoys being a green entrepreneur. “I like that there is always some aspect of the business that I can work on to improve.”

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TIPAWAN T-Q REED

Occupation: President, OAI, Inc.

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Education: Bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology; master's degree in cultural/linguistic anthropology; advanced certification in secondary and adult education



Tipawan T-Q Reed is the president and founder of OAI, Inc., a Chicago-based nonprofit agency that has been engaged in training workers in environmental remediation for 15 years. Each year, OAI trains about 250 low-income individuals who face barriers to employment for jobs in environmental remediation, construction, horticulture, landscaping, weatherization, and other green careers in Chicago, the Kansas City metropolitan area of Missouri and Kansas, and Dallas. OAI also provides health and safety training to more than 2,000 first responders, renovators, and hazardous waste handlers around the country each year. Today, her organization is spreading out into a variety of other green areas. As she explained, “Now it’s fashionable to be green, but we were green before it was in vogue. And we continue to be. It’s a field where the time has come.”

Tipawan, who was born in Thailand to Vietnamese parents, began her career teaching English as a second language and writing grant proposals. She quickly learned she was successful in grant-writing, a skill she has found vital in growing her agency and expanding into green areas. She worked for the Illinois Department of Education and a consortium of Chicago-area school districts before launching OAI 33 years ago. She was honored on Earth Day 2010 with the Chicago Foundation for Women’s Breaking Barriers Award for her work in preparing workers for green jobs.

OAI began as an agency offering training and education services to Indochinese refugees, but Tipawan found that the model was applicable to other groups as well. When federal funding dried up, she retooled the organization to serve other disadvantaged populations who reside in environmental justice communities. Her organization took on a green tint in 1995, when she applied for and received a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences to provide environmental remediation training to underserved minority populations. “It wasn’t called ‘green,’ but we were working with people and getting them interested in environmental jobs, jobs that have to do with environmental remediation, with soil remediation, with green landscaping, etc.,” she said.

In recent years, OAI has partnered with the city of Chicago to operate the Chicago Greencorps, which provides both work experience and training opportunities in areas such as brownfield cleanup, lead and asbestos removal, horticulture, landscaping, weatherization, and recycling. Tipawan reports that Greencorps especially targets ex-offenders, who have some of the highest barriers to employment. She noted that about 70 percent are successful in finding jobs in their fields. More recently, OAI has collaborated with Cob Connection to provide paid work experience and job training in urban agriculture.

Tipawan says that the growing green economy provides a wide range of opportunities for good-paying jobs that enable women to take care of themselves and their families. She encourages women to consider nontraditional jobs such as environmental remediation, which requires physical labor but provides entry into unions, excellent wages, and benefits. “I’m proud that OAI has become a national green job training leader and policy advocate. And I encourage women to think broadly about all the green career opportunities that are out there,” Tipawan states. “Green jobs are providing people with good wages and, at the same time, helping them learn to protect the environment.”

FINDING YOUR OWN CAREER PATH

As these women have experienced, a green career can be rewarding in many different ways and can start from many different entry points. Words like “inspiring,” “passionate,” and “exciting” run through their descriptions of their work. With dedication and effort, you too can find a career path that is equally interesting and fulfilling. Use these women’s examples and this guide to help you discover, plan, prepare, and succeed in your own green career!

You can get help charting your own green career path through the Internet, networking, college counselors, workforce development agencies, and by using the worksheets included in Chapter 9, “Planning Your Green Career: Tools and Worksheets.”