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Mechanic to Marine

At the break of dawn in a bustling Chevy service bay, Audrey Denise, 19, pulls her hair back and heads to her first repair of the day. The hum of machinery and tools drone in the background as she gets to work. Among the hustle of the shop, Denise stands out, not just as the only woman on the Chevy side of the shop but as a skilled technician.

Despite making up nearly half of the U.S. workforce, women account for only 2.3% of automotive service technicians and mechanics, and just 10.9% of the skilled trades overall, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. While the median annual wage for auto mechanics is about \$47,770, research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research shows that female technicians earn roughly 17% less than their male counterparts.

Denise's story is not an isolated experience but a glimpse into the shifting landscapes of the trades. As traditional demographics of the trades evolve and the demand for skilled labor intensifies, the need for inclusivity becomes not just a moral imperative, but an economic one. The transition of workers like Denise, from decades in a predominantly male industry to new roles in the military, showcases the broader challenges and opportunities for Americans in manufacturing and service industries.

From a childhood spent in her father's shop to working 60-hour weeks at a Chevy dealership, Denise has built her career in an industry dominated by men. But after facing years of implicit bias, missed opportunities and the constant pressure to prove herself, she's leaving it behind. Trading her grease-stained jeans for a Marine Corps uniform, where she hopes her skills will be valued for what they are, not who she is.

"Good morning, Aud." Denise finished pulling her hair back, smiling at the dispatcher.

"Mornin'. Whatcha got for me today?"

A smile tugged at his lips. "I've got a repair order for you, some recalls. Oh, and a Cadillac came in with a complaint of squealing brakes. Says it sounds like they're tearing through something."

She rolled her eyes. "Joy."

She hopped into the first recall of the day and drove it from the bullpen to her stall. "Another faulty tailgate," she mumbled to herself. She dragged her tool cart over to the truck and got to work.

An hour later, with the latch assembly replaced and tested, a satisfied smile settled onto her face. She sent the truck off to the lube rack for routine maintenance.

Denise had been in shops since she was a kid. Her dad grew up in the Chevy shop in Colorado, and she spent countless hours watching him work, fascinated by how big machines ran. He used to pull her out of school on Fridays and take her to the shop, despite her mother's protests.

She would ask endless questions, and if he wasn't too busy, he'd teach her what he could. If he was swamped, he'd stick her on the ground with a tire and a few tools, letting her tinker.

Sometimes, they stayed late past closing, just the two of them, as he showed her how things worked. By the time she was old enough to truly understand engines, she was already more comfortable in a shop than in most classrooms.

Kyle Knight, her coworker, sauntered up. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, wiping her hands on her already dirty jeans.

As she and Knight pulled the car into the bay, they immediately noticed something was off. With the vehicle lifted, Denise crouched down to get a better look. That’s when she saw it.

A towel, tightly wound around the brake rotor and caliper. Somehow, it had been sucked deep into the assembly. She laughed, shaking her head.

“Well, that’s a new one,” she said.

Once they had everything installed, they took the Cadillac for a test drive to make sure the brakes were working smoothly. Satisfied, they pulled the car back into the bay and wrote up the job.

“That’s a first,” Denise said. “Never seen a towel take out a set of brakes before.”

By the time the clock crept toward five, Denise wiped the grease from her hands onto a shop rag, glancing around the bay. Nothing pressing left to do, but not quite enough time to start another job either. This was the perfect time for diagnostics.

As she worked, she reflected on what it was like being in a male-dominated field. She didn’t have many bad things to say about it, she was treated well, sometimes even better than her male coworkers. But it was also intimidating. She knew she could work just as hard, yet she felt she’d never be fully accepted. Never seen as just “as good” simply because she wasn’t a straight white

man. She worked more than most of the men in the shop, but still felt like she had to prove herself constantly.

While Denise noted that many male customers rarely challenge her competence, the undercurrents of sexism are harder to ignore. “Sometimes, a comment is so offhand it’s almost laughable, but it still stings,” she admits. More troubling, however, are the experiences within her own workplace.

Recently, Todd Rust, a married 60-year-old service manager sent her explicit, unsolicited text messages, that crudely complimented her appearance and even included a shirtless photo flaunting his tattoos.

On another occasion, he inappropriately touched her in his office, an incident she initially dismissed as an accident until surveillance footage proved otherwise. Though Chevy’s human resources expressed their mortification, no real disciplinary action was taken as Rust still holds his position of over 40 years, leaving Denise to wonder if she would ever be seen as just another technician, rather than “a distraction.”

These incidents underscore the sexual harassment that many women in the trades endure, adding an extra layer of struggle to an already demanding environment. In an industry traditionally dominated by 40-year-old white males, many women face workplace cultures where their competence is constantly questioned and their respect is almost non-existent.

An article written by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, about women in the construction industry, states that 44.4% of women have seriously considered leaving their industry, the most common reason being the harassment and lack of respect they face. While

Denise does not work in this trade it highlights the fact that these issues are not isolated across blue-collar workplaces.

With the day's end, Denise headed home. The grease and grime of the day washed away in the shower, and with it, the weight of another day finished. By the time she collapsed into bed, her alarm already waited, a reminder that tomorrow would bring another round of grease, repairs, and roaring engines.

But not for much longer.

Denise had originally been on track to go to school through Chevy's program. She was under contract to work for five years and attend school in Twin Falls, Idaho. But then, they pushed her back a year. The next year, they sent a 17-year-old male coworker. When she confronted her service manager Terry Hedrick, he admitted he didn't want a girl in the shop, saying she'd be a "distraction." The owner, Brad Morehouse, openly told her Chevy had an "old Western mindset" and preferred to keep the shop all-male.

When she threatened with a drafted letter from her mother's lawyer, they tried to smooth things over, saying they'd send her to school the following year. But by then, it was too late. The damage was done. The relationship was strained beyond repair.

When asked to comment Chevy refused to respond.

Denise had made the decision to leave Chevy behind. Despite her love for the work, the weight of working in a male-dominated shop had worn on her. She was tired of feeling like she had to prove herself twice over, once as a mechanic and again as a woman in a space where she often felt disrespected and like an outsider.

No matter how many hours she put in, how much grease covered her hands, or how well she knew the ins and outs of an engine, there was always the lingering sense that she had to fight for the respect her male coworkers were handed without question.

So, she pivoted. The military offered a different kind of opportunity, one where skill and discipline came first.

She'd signed an aviation contract with the Marines, trading brake pads and oil changes for aircraft engines and rotor blades. In the hangars, she wouldn't just be a woman in a shop, she'd be a Marine, expected to perform at the same standard as everyone else. And that, at least, felt like a different kind of fight, one she was ready to take on.