

Getting her hands dirty

Woman enjoys her job as auto body worker *Nov 81*

By Helen Connell
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The grime clinging to Karen Favalaro's hands isn't the type you can rinse off under the taps. It's ground-in grease, dust and paint — the stock and trade of an auto body repair worker.

But 29-year-old Favalaro doesn't mind getting her hands dirty for \$12 an hour. Women work in day-care centres for less than half that money and Favalaro says that job carries risks all its own.

"A kid could throw up on you." Favalaro has been working in auto body repair for four years, recently moving to the Highbury Ford dealership. She's the only woman in the garage, but then she's used to being a minority of one. She was the only woman among 40 auto body apprentices at Fanshawe College in London.

She enrolled in the program not knowing the names of all the tools. The instructor would ask her to tape up some portion of the car. "I'd have to ask what part of the car that was."

Usually a smile preceded the answer, but she's what's known as a quick study and instructors and fellow students were supportive and respectful of her efforts to crack into this largely man's world of grease guns and carburetors.

Not everyone has been as accepting as she found out when she tried to find her first work placement. Even if it meant free labor, most garage owners she approached weren't interested. "You could just see it in their eyes."

She finally got a chance to prove herself at Cabell Auto Body and ended up staying there for her full three-year apprenticeship. There's something of the girl-next-door to Favalaro, who said she's never had

worth it for \$12 an hour

a problem fitting into the garages where she's worked.

"I've always found when I started somewhere the language cleaned up. Most of the guys are family men anyway."

However, Favalaro said she knows integration into male-dominated jobs isn't as easy for all women. One of her friends was sexually harassed by a garage owner for whom she worked. "He was making advances at her."

Favalaro taught music for seven years before deciding she wanted to change careers. She was looking for something entirely different and which paid better. Her aunt was in auto body repair and Favalaro said having a role model was an important factor. "I knew it could be done."

In some ways she feels lucky because she's found employers willing to let her prove herself. "Unfortunately, there's not that many open-minded people."

How well she performs affects others as well. "What I do could affect not only the ease of other women getting into this trade but many other trades."

Favalaro sees similarities between her auto body job and her years spent teaching music, for both demand a high degree of professionalism.

"There's an element of perfection in it. It's similar to music. You see a car come in smacked up. You see it go out with the paint all shiny."

Auto body work isn't something Favalaro plans to do for the rest of her life. **She's taking courses at university, working toward becoming a teacher, perhaps even teaching technical courses.** She credits her training both at Fanshawe and on the job for building confidence.

"It flows over into everything. I'm more willing to try things now."



Mike Jordan/Free Press

Karen Favalaro of London is pleased with her decision to become an auto body worker.