



Alive!

Laura Biggie, Building and Safety, Club Member, during an inspection of a Port Police dog kennel facility under construction in the Harbor area.



Building and Safety

Pioneering Plumber

As the City's first female plumbing Training Officer, Laura Biggie, Commercial Plumbing Inspector/ Training Officer, Building and Safety, proves she belongs.

— PAGE 23 —

Alive! photo by Tom Hawkins



HALLOWEEN DEALS

— See Page 45

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IS THE ZOO HAUNTED? DECIDE FOR YOURSELF!

— PAGE 17

Alive! Feature



Building and Safety

Pioneering Plumber

As the City's first female plumbing Training Officer, Laura Biggie, Commercial Plumbing Inspector/ Training Officer, Building and Safety, and Club Member, proves she belongs.

Photos by Tom Hawkins, Club photographer; Summy Lam, Club Director of Marketing; and courtesy Laura Biggie.

Laura Biggie's bus trip from Minnesota to California before she turned 18 was a big step in her life. But it was only the beginning of her pioneering.

After a career in the private world, often being the only female plumber on big job sites, she moved to the City and continued her trail-blazing ways. Hired first as a Plumbing Inspector – she wasn't the first female in that role, but

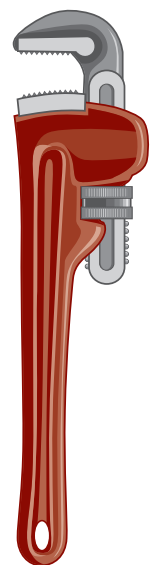
probably the first to be hired directly into it – she then was promoted, and is now the City's first female Plumbing Training Officer. It's the first time in the City a woman has trained men in plumbing, in what still is a heavily male-dominated trade.

Here, Laura Biggie, Club Member, recounts her experiences, talks about those who helped her along the way, and shows the positive attitude that has been critical in her success.

— See "Interview," page 24

Alive! Feature: **Pioneering Plumber**

The *Alive!* Interview



'I Go and Get It'

An interview with Building and Safety's first female Plumbing Training Officer, Laura Biggie, Club Member.

On Sept. 13, Club CEO John Hawkins and Alive! editor John Burnes interviewed Laura Biggie, Commercial Plumbing Inspector/Training Officer, Building and Safety, in the fourth floor conference room at Building and Safety headquarters downtown. – Ed.

Alive!: We are speaking with Laura Biggie here at Building and Safety headquarters downtown. How long have you worked for the City of L.A.?

LAURA: Five years.

You had some experience in the trades before you came to the City, right?

LAURA: I sure did. I joined the plumbers' union in 1997. I was working as a chimney sweep when I was waiting to get called by the union, and they called me out to work about 16 years ago.

After the chimney sweeping, you went to the plumbers' union where you worked for a company.

LAURA: Yes, H.L. Moe out of Glendale. Mike Davis, the president, gave me a shot. He said, "We'll take her," and that's how I got my start in the business.

Let's start your career trajectory from when you started with the City five years ago.

LAURA: I was working as a project engineer for a general contractor and I called Jimmy Ortega, a Sr. Plumbing Inspector for the City and instructor at the Apprentice and Journeyman Training Center for the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters. Jimmy was my apprenticeship instructor. I called him and asked him questions about a plastic liner we were installing on this project, and he informed me that the City was taking emergency hires. Basically that day I went downtown, signed up, and applied to work here. They called me, and I got hired on as an emergency hire as a commercial plumbing inspector.

Is that unusual to come in to the City as an inspector?

LAURA: No, no. You have to have a certain number of years' experience in the trade, so I met that criteria. After about six months, I took a test to get hired on permanently.

I worked as a district plumbing inspector in West L.A. My district covered Pacific Palisades all the way down to Venice Beach. It's really difficult to find parking. The joke was that Laura parked at home – because I lived right there in Venice Beach – put her roller skates on and went up and down the boardwalk and did inspections, but that never happened!

What happened after that?

LAURA: Our plumbing training officer was retiring, so I put in for a transfer. I was already doing some training in West L.A. in addition to our weekly tailgates. I trained these guys how to do things on e-mail and various things like gas releases.

Was that training on your own initiative?

LAURA: Yes, on my own initiative. The training I gave was just at our desks, informal training sessions. I was in school at the time, earning my Bachelor's in education. The Training officer had been historically a senior position. When my supervisor broke his hip – it's a dangerous job, I put in for a transfer to Training. When I informed him that I did this, he was very supportive of my ambitions to do training.

And you got it.

LAURA: Yes.

How did someone who wasn't a Senior Inspector become a trainer?

LAURA: Well ...

Brag a little.

LAURA: I believe my experience, education and my desire to do it counted for a lot.

Were you surprised when you got word that you were then a trainer?

LAURA: No. When I want something I go and get it. I don't expect that things are not going to happen.

Laura Biggie (center) explains her actions as she inspects a kennel being built for the Port Police dogs. With her (from left) are Herb Grageda, Principal Construction Inspector, Harbor, 32 years of City service; John Burnes, *Alive!* editor; and John Hawkins, Club CEO.



What do you want to do next?

LAURA: I'm really enjoying training because I feel like I have a lot of freedom here to make a difference. We incorporated video conferencing. My supervisors are very supportive. I have a lot of artistic freedom. I can be creative and come up with things and they're willing to try it out. If it works, great; if it doesn't we try something else.

Of course I'd like to move up in the City and become a senior inspector. And finish my Master's program at the University of La Verne.

Talk about the video-conferencing project. Was it tough to get off the ground?

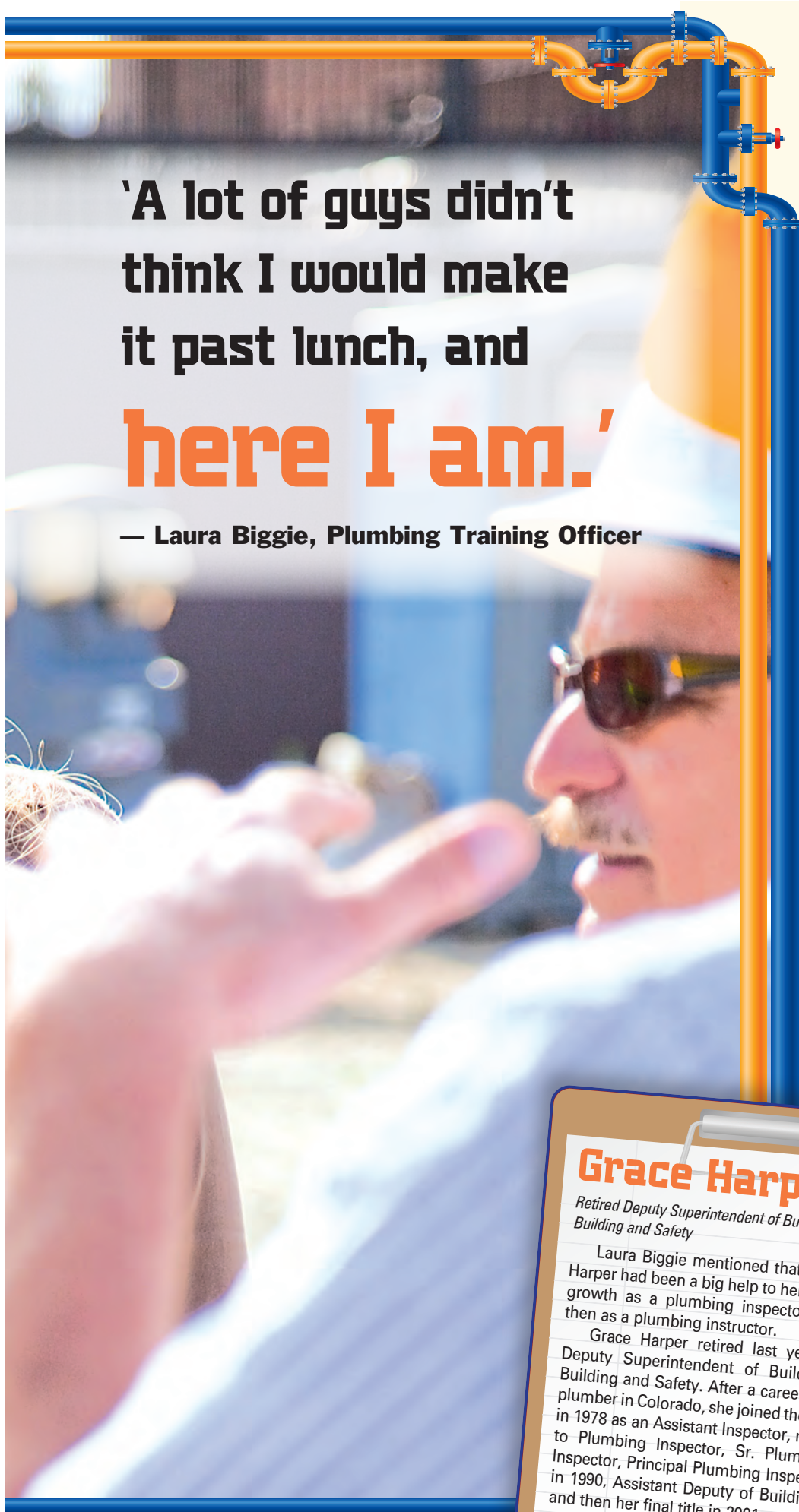
LAURA: The most challenging was when I first came over to training division and I saw the teleconferencing equipment, and here I had these inspectors who were not really using it.

They weren't used to the technology.

LAURA: Well, they tried it once. It didn't work. So after I came on board, I saw the usefulness of it. When I started, I had worked in a satellite office in West LA and you feel out of the loop; you feel like everything's happening in Metro downtown. So now that I was in Metro, I wanted to share everything we

'A lot of guys didn't think I would make it past lunch, and here I am.'

— Laura Biggie, Plumbing Training Officer



lot of fun. We get a lot of work done, with a lot of camaraderie.

Just sitting around and talking about plumbing with the assistant inspectors, during a training session – that's my favorite part. When I can see their wheels turning or when I'm asking them questions and they've got it. Anybody who's a teacher knows that feeling, and there's nothing better than that.

The Road From Minnesota

What's the story of how you came from Minnesota to Los Angeles?

She takes out a bus ticket.



Laura Biggie holds the Greyhound bus ticket she used to travel from Minnesota to Los Angeles.

LAURA: There's my first Greyhound bus ticket. So this is three months after my 17th birthday, I spent four days on a Greyhound bus from St. Paul to Los Angeles.

You decided to try a new location, a new city, a new life.

LAURA: Have you visited the Midwest? It's very cold there. And the summers are very humid. People don't realize how hot it is in the Midwest in the summer. It's very humid, and there are a lot of mosquitoes.

I left Minnesota and I came out to Los Angeles, and I got three jobs right away. I worked at a video store and a clothing store, and I worked as a barista. When you're 17, you're broke, you work at places where you can eat there, and then I remember at one point I was homeless and I lived in the security guard's car behind Ralphs parking lot for a couple of days.

Then I actually moved in with three guys who were working at the video store. They let me sleep on the couch and kind of felt sorry for me. They would order pizza and give me some. I was really just this skinny, frail ragamuffin kind of person. I did not want to go back to Minnesota. They convinced me to stay; "We'll help you out." I had a lot of help along the way.

A neighbor of mine had looked in the paper. There was an ad for plumbers, so I went to the plumbers' union. They offered health benefits after six months, which was very important to me, because I'd lived on my own since I was 15. I was in a foster home for six months at 15 and then grabbed my things and left. I then worked in catering making little triangle sandwiches.

Then you came out here and had started to make it on your own.

LAURA: So I was doing the chimney sweeping. Once I started working out of the plumber's union, I had to quit all my other jobs.



Laura Biggie (right) credits her then-supervisor Jim Dimit (center) for helping her in her career. Also pictured is Jim Empero (left).

Pioneer

You mentioned that people here in the City have treated you better than before you joined the City.

LAURA: Right. When I first started at the City, I was stationed in West L.A. with Jim Dimit, who was my supervisor. He invited me to a Unified Plumbing and Piping Association meeting in Long Beach – an IAPMO UPPA meeting, and that's how I started to get a little more involved in the plumbing industry on the side. He invited me to these things.

I didn't realize until later that Grace Harper had started with the City through the Assistant Inspector Program. She started over 30 years ago with the City of Los Angeles. She came in through the assistants program and moved her way up to pretty near the top. [See sidebar. – Ed.]

She moved her way up through the ranks of Plumbing Inspector all the way up to chief. It was good to have her blaze the trail so to speak, because when I would go out and give inspections the guys would kind of look at me and say, "Oh, like Grace Harper?" I'd spend the first five minutes explaining who I was because they looked at me and didn't realize I was their plumbing inspector. But once I got to know the contractors, then they expected me, they knew me, and it was not a problem. Everyone has to kind of prove themselves. But having Grace go through before me definitely helped.

But I'm the first female to be in the training division as a training officer, and the first female to be hired directly as a commercial plumbing inspector. I had not gone through the assistant's program first.

Everybody's been very supportive here. Perhaps they were concerned when I became a training officer – will these guys listen to her? Will they respect her? But the idea of training adults is you have to respect their background. You have to take into consideration their background and knowledge, their 30 years' experience in the trade. It's an issue of mutual respect; you respect them and what they bring to the table and their background, and they respect you, that you're training them and giving them new information. They appreciate that.

When I first started, I talked to most every lady who worked here. Grace suggested that I at least get a Master's degree. Grace did a lot in the City.

Grace Harper

Retired Deputy Superintendent of Buildings, Building and Safety

Laura Biggie mentioned that Grace Harper had been a big help to her in her growth as a plumbing inspector, and then as a plumbing instructor.

Grace Harper retired last year as Deputy Superintendent of Buildings, Building and Safety. After a career as a plumber in Colorado, she joined the City in 1978 as an Assistant Inspector, rising to Plumbing Inspector, Sr. Plumbing Inspector, Principal Plumbing Inspector in 1990, Assistant Deputy of Buildings, and then her final title in 2001.

She says she was the first woman in a senior level in Building and Safety, although she's grateful for the three or four women inspectors of all on the job during her time as an inspector.

She holds a certificate from the State of California for being the first female journey-level plumber in state history. The certificate dates from 1977.

Grace first met Laura Biggie when Grace "was being honored at a WINTER [Women in Non-Traditional Employment Roles] meeting, and she came up and congratulated me," Grace remembers. "Then she joined the City, but I didn't know it. She was assigned to West LA at the time.

"After she joined the City, she called me for advice. I told her to do what you're supposed to do, and try everything that you can in terms of training and education. Make sure you get an education."

Advice that Laura has heeded: Grace earned a Doctoral degree, and Laura is working on her Master's degree.



were doing in Metro with the other offices. But the guys said, "No. We already did that before. It didn't work." I did a survey with the guys: "Well, why didn't it work?" "Well, nobody talked." "Why didn't anybody talk?" "Well, because all the supervisors were there." "Okay, so all the managers were in the room and nobody's talking; okay, that makes sense; I can fix that."

Cornell Ewell, the Supervising Senior Inspector in Van Nuys, was very influential in putting this together and getting everybody on board from all three offices. At first the guys wanted to hide under the table, but after that initial mistrust, after that subsided, it was like we were all in the same room. It was like just having a regular meeting.

You're still doing them now.

LAURA: Yes, and now if there's a problem with the equipment they're upset; they want their MTV. They really like using the equipment now.

What do you like about working for the City?

LAURA: Well, first and foremost, the people here are wonderful. I've never worked with a better group of individuals, to be honest with you. It was pretty rough out there in construction as a female. Once people get to know you it's fine, they're pretty good, but the people who work here are amazing to work with. We have a

And they're massive.

LAURA: Oh, they will carry you away. So, honestly, I wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to work with dolphins and sea life and I wanted to be a marine biologist.

Had you ever seen the ocean at that point?

LAURA: No, but to me it seemed like a lofty goal. But college involves money. The plumbers' union paid me to go to school, and I got health benefits.



City Plumbing Inspectors and their wives at a formal event, 1930. Photo courtesy IAPMO: www.iapmo.org

– continued page 26

Laura Biggie proudly wears a red polka-dot bandana in honor of Rosie the Riveter.



Modern-Day Rosie

Laura Biggie feels a kinship with Rosie the Riveter, the famous California factory worker during World War II who has come to symbolize the cause of women in the workplace.

The story starts with Laura's grandfather, Vern Rasmussen, back in Minnesota.

"My grandfather trained the Rosies at his factory during World War II," she explains.

"I got a Rosie the Riveter bandana at last year's tradeswomen convention in Sacramento" to pay tribute, she continues.

"It's a life changer to be in a room full of so many women, when I remember the days of being the lone female on a construction site. There was no Internet, no

Facebook, no way of knowing how other women were faring. You had to figure it out on your own, which is what led me to join WINTER [Women in Non-Traditional Employment Roles]. They now have a Rosie the Riveter Charter High School in Long Beach that trains women to join the trades.

"The Rosies broke the barriers for women to get into the workforce," she continues. "They proved that 'we can do it,' and we continue to prove it every day."

Several women have been credited with being the original Rosie the Riveter. Rose Will Monroe, a military airplane factory worker in Michigan who starred in morale-building newsreels at the time, died in 1997. Geraldine Hoff Doyle, another Michigan factory worker, inspired the famous Westinghouse "We Can Do It" illustration; she died in 2010.

At press time, an emergency fundraising effort was under way to save from demolition the Ford military airplane factory in Michigan where Rose Will Monroe originally toiled.



The *Alive!* Interview, continued from page 25

She had some great advice for me. She was very helpful.

All the ladies here were helpful when I started, the guys too!

Sounds like it was better here in the City than it was working outside of the City.

LAURA: Yes. They would try to run me off. Working in the trades, working with different individuals. They would try to run me off. Here, I don't think they want to run me off. I think they're happy with how I treat them and how I conduct my business at training, and the guys call me up and they thank me. They ask me questions or ask me for help, and they're just very gracious and appreciative. The reason why I go out of my way for these guys is that they helped me out when I first started; they helped me out a lot.

I love it when the guys call to ask me questions or talk about things because they're my eyes and ears in the field, and I need to get out into the field more to keep my saw sharpened and keep my inspector head about me. It's not just training that I do. We are working on the L.A. City code amendments, the code adoption cycle. I add changes to certain code sections that may not be in our drop-down menu on our database when we write correction notices in the field, so the guys will let me know what code sections need to be added. I'll do that for them.

Do you feel like a pioneer? Are you aware of your status? Do you take it in stride? Do you not worry about it or is it something that you are proud of, that the way you do things might be modeled for years to come?

LAURA: Oh, now I'm scared! So when you asked me, in planning this interview, if there's any hesitation about putting myself out there like this, I kind of laughed at you because we as women in the trades are very outgoing; we're not afraid of anything. We walk on jobsites with 200 guys staring at us and not in a good way. It's like in the wild. When you have all these eyes looking at you it means that they're going to devour me. They're going to ask me questions and throw grenades at me, and I'd better be able to catch the grenade and throw it back because it's not an easy job.

I grew up with my single dad, so I was never socialized to say I couldn't do something because I was a girl. It was, "You're a kid. Pick up the shovel. Shovel the snow. Rake the leaves. I'm building a deck. Hold the level. Pass me this." I was Dad's gofer. Basically, I was learning on the job!

Do you feel you have less leeway in what you do, and people are less quick to forgive you, that maybe a man can get away with more things than you can get away with?

LAURA: I think it works both ways. Sometimes I can get away with things that maybe a man couldn't get away with, but yes, maybe there's a barrier, I don't know. I've had instances in private industry where they wanted to give me certain projects because I was a woman, so I'd take those projects and I'd get really good at them and then go get hired somewhere else, making more money and taking those skills with me. I turned every single obstacle into a positive, and that's the kind of attitude you have to have. If you have a chip on your shoulder, it's not going to work.

What lessons have you learned? Or what advice would you give to people who are coming behind you or who want to do the same thing that you're doing?

LAURA: This is what I've been told – to be patient. It's really hard when you're excited and you want everything right now and you have to just relax and be patient and let things unfold. I think I need to take my own advice on that, too, but everyone has to prove themselves. Just be patient and focus on the guys who are helping you; focus on the people who help you. Don't focus on the one or two because sometimes on a job, and I found this in private industry, you'd have a job and it'd just be that one guy who would make your life miserable and go out of his way to just torment you. There's always going to be that one guy for everybody on every job. If you could focus on the good people and don't let that person have that power over you—once you let them make you miserable, you've given up your power. Take your power back and focus on the people who are helping you because there are so

At the inspection of the Port Police dog kennel, from left: Herb Grageda, Principal Construction Inspector, Harbor; Laura Biggie, Commercial Plumbing Inspector/Training Officer, Building and Safety; and John Hawkins, Club CEO.



Interviewing Laura Biggie (center) at Building and Safety headquarters downtown are John Burnes, *Alive!* editor (left) and John Hawkins, Club CEO.

**Alive! Feature:
Pioneering Plumber**

many wonderful people here at the City. Don't let one bad apple spoil the whole bunch.

A lot of guys didn't think I would make it past lunch, and here I am.

**You're walking your own walk.
You're doing the advice you're giving.**

LAURA: I get depressed, I get negative. I could have all these people saying positive things to me except one person, so I need to remind myself, "Hey, that's not the end of the world. That's just that one person's opinion."

It sounds like the City was more supportive of you as a woman than it was in private industry.

LAURA: Oh, big time. There's no question.

And now you've been on two covers [including Official, the magazine of her association, IAPMO].

LAURA: I was on a training and education committee for IAPMO. I'm popular because I can't say no to anything that they want me to do. I was sitting in a training and education committee meeting, and their writers and editors came into our meeting and asked us for article



At Port Police dog kennel project are Laura Biggie, Building and Safety; Herb Grageda, Harbor; and John Hawkins, Club CEO.

ideas. A couple of months later, I contacted them and said, "You should do an article on women plumbing inspectors."

How did you get chosen for the cover?

LAURA: Because I'm in Los Angeles and they can come out and take pictures on some job sites that I had.

Seven?

LAURA: Yes. I'm a hoarder of accordions. I haven't played in a club since I was maybe 20 years old, so it's a good thing I retired from that circuit. The last time my dad was out, we learned Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" on accordion.

Accordion playing is not something you advertise. It's very dorky, and you don't really tell a lot of people because it's not cool.

More to Accomplish

Anything else you want to accomplish?

LAURA: Well, I have a pilot project in the works, to get a grant to teach high-school students to show them that they can join the trades. I want to train them how to join an apprenticeship, get paid to work while they learn a trade and go to night school. I think these high-school students need to know their options. A lot of people don't feel they're college bound; they don't want to go to college; they don't want to sit in school all day. They want to be out in the field working in the trades. I want them to know they have options.

Would this be through Building and Safety?

LAURA: No. It's separate. We don't have the grant yet.

It's important to you to pass along your experiences.

LAURA: Yes. I hope people reading this article – the men and women who work for the City – will show this to their daughters and they'll say, "Hey, that looks like something I'd be interested in doing." We need more women in construction.

I think you're going to be surprised at how many people will be inspired by you on the cover.

LAURA: Oh my God.

Thanks, Laura, for your time and your story.

LAURA: Thank you, guys! ■

The Accordion

How did you start playing the accordion? We saw you playing that when you sent in a photo to Alive! for Father's Day.

LAURA: Well, when I first moved out here, my dad sent out an accordion for my 18th birthday. I got it and I practiced it and I was ready to play at our office Christmas party, the Screaming Kings clothing store Christmas party at the CIA Club in Burbank. So that was my debut.

When are you going to play your accordion next in public?

LAURA: Well, you can pay me not to! I'm actually moving in October, and I don't know if my new landlord's aware I have seven accordions.



Laura playing the accordion with her dad.



Laura Biggie inspects an under-construction (exposed) clothes and animal washer at the Port Police dog kennel project.

Other Women

While Laura Biggie is Building and Safety's first female Training Officer in its history, Building and Safety has had female Inspectors for many years, and features several now. Several of them gathered for a photo for *Alive!* in the early morning before their assignments took them around the City.

BELOW: Some of Building and Safety's female Inspectors, from left: Julie Hazuka, Electrical Inspector, 12 years of City service; Gaye Chapman, Electrical Inspector, 9 years; Lisa Yancey, Building Inspector, 14 years; Darla D. Abel, Sr. Safety Engineer/Elevators, 13 years; Laura Biggie, Plumbing Inspector/Training Officer, 5 years; Karin Izumi, Sr. Fire Sprinkler Inspector; and Cheryl Chisolm, Sr. Electrical Inspector, 12 years.



Tell us about women in the City!

Alive! knows that there are many other women in the City doing the work traditionally done by men, and many of them are great Club Members. If that's you, then write to us and let us know of your experience!

Send your comments to talkback@cityemployeesclub.com

