



NEWS

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"MINER MOMS" FOR THE MTA: DIGGING THEIR WAY TO SUCCESS AT WORK AND HOME

One thousand feet below the surface of the Santa Monica Mountains, where muck and goo lurk everywhere, twin 20-foot-8-inch in diameter subway tunnels are being constructed that will connect the Hollywood and North Hollywood segments of the Metro Red Line. Women miners are cut no slack here. The few that work in the tunnels must carry their own weight.

Celsa Rijos and Eve Reeves are forging careers in a very non-traditional job for women. There are only six women who work as miners on a construction crew employed by the Traylor Co, the contractor building the tunnel. It's back-breaking work, but someone has to do it.

Most male miners accept the females, however, despite an underlying superstition - women are considered bad luck because in years past the only time a woman would be seen near a mine was after a disaster. This attitude prevails in other countries.

And as they help the team that is tunneling through difficult terrain by helping to remove tons of earth and rock in an atmosphere where the slightest exertion causes one to sweat profusely, two women manage to maintain a traditional role at home.

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Rijos, 39, credits her former husband, who insisted she look beyond a job as a Styrofoam coffee cup maker to help earn money to pay family bills. At 5-foot-1, 110 pounds, not too many people thought she could measure up to the physical demands of a tunnel miner.

Today, she drives a 35-ton underground locomotive, called a loci by miners, at speeds of up to 15 mph, delivering tons of steel ribbing and wire lagging to workers and removing nearly 300 cubic yards of muck every 24 hours, a trip she makes 30 times daily during her 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift.

When not operating the loci, Rijos, who wears a tool belt around her waist, appears like one of the guys as she helps out wherever needed. This includes heavy lifting and shoveling dirt onto a flat car near the face of the tunnel.

"She's a dandy and came highly recommendable," said Traylor Co. tunnel superintendent Cal Negley. "She's pleasant to work with. She always has a smile on her face and is liked by everyone."

"She's one of the few female workers who you can hang out with," said John Silvas. "She doing a very good job. She's a hard worker. If women can do the job, that's fine," said miner Jim Lamb.

"It is a very challenging job and you learn a lot," the Philippines-born Rijos said. "It's especially challenging for a woman, but as long as you carry your weight, the guys will respect you."

Rijos turns into a June Cleaver-type after work, switching mind-set gears from tough to sensitive and nurturing.

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"Somehow I'm able to shut out the tunnel part of my life completely when I'm at home," Rijos said. "My first priority is taking care of my son's needs, nursing colds, making dinner, going to the movies, fishing, even racing remote control cars together. But the main thing is just listening to what's happening in his world." She regularly attends her straight-A student son's High School plays and PTA meetings.

Beside her son, the Long Beach resident's biggest supporter is her own mother. "She thinks I work very, very hard. She is proud of me and prays for me every day."

Referring to herself as the "black sheep" of the family because she was the only one in her family not to finish college, Reeves, 40, a mother of three, went against the wishes of her Stanford University-educated dad to enter the construction field nearly 18 years ago.

"I was a rebellious teen-ager, what can I say," said the native of Sausalito, California.

The operator forewoman, who likes to be "treated like a lady at home," said this particular job has taken on greater significance for her.

"I look at myself as a pioneer. If I do not give 300 percent every day, then I'm not setting a good example," said Reeves, a resident of Valencia. "You really have to prove yourself. It's important that you carry your weight. It {tunnel work} is definitely not for everybody."

Reeves is the family's main bread-winner ever since her husband became disabled several years ago. She said her family is behind her all the way.

"They think what I do is really cool."

And, as far as her dad is concerned: "He's really proud of me, now."

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“The drive and determination being displayed by these and other women working in the tunnels is truly amazing,” said MTA Board Chairman Larry Zarian. “Hopefully the examples Celsa and Eve are setting will encourage other women to apply for these same jobs. They are definitely some of the toughest individuals we have working for us, and extremely capable.”

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