

Arizona Cement Masons: Creating Job Opportunities

Veronica Nunez is in her fourth year of her apprenticeship with Arizona Cement Masons.

When she becomes a journeyman, she will know form setting, patching, concrete placing and finishing and will be proficient in the safe use of power tools. She also will be among the most skilled cement workers in the state.



She's grateful that she discovered the Arizona Cement Masons Local 394's apprenticeship program, where she is currently one of 12 men and women receiving top-notch training in the trade.

The apprenticeship has trained more than 125 people over the past 10 years. The program is the only one recognized for cement masonry and plastering by the state of Arizona.

"Everything I've learned that's good, right, and quality is union," said Nunez. "I know I'm in the right place."

While in the program, the apprentices learn techniques including specialty patching, curb/gutter layout and laying super floors.

With specialty patching training, they learn to do architectural patching and how to correctly color match patches and textures.

The curb-and-gutter training includes setting, pouring and finishing curb and gutter so that the flow lines are correct.

Additionally, apprentices learn how to do floors with super flat specifications. They also practice pouring, stripping, and facing concrete steps with mockup pan steps.

Acquiring these skills is vital to the success of aspiring cement masons, said Tom Hardie, Arizona Cement Masons Local 394's business manager. Because of the high-quality standards set by the union, the tasks are tough.

Apprentices will go through about 20 written tests plus additional field testing over a period of three years. The tests cover anything from math and blueprint reading to proper tool usage and identification.

Hardie said the blueprint reading is probably one of the tougher tests.

“If you don’t have a background in blueprints, it’s a lot to take in,” Hardie said. “They learn everything about scales and legends because that’s what’s used for layout, and they have to make sure they get the slab in the right spot.”



Hardie points to the apprenticeship with pride. It’s important for Local 394 to develop a trained workforce that sets it apart from laborers in the market. He continuously builds on the reputation of Local 394 as having the most skilled cement masons in Arizona.

Hardie also tries to add a bit of fun during the training. He throws the occasional friendly competition among the apprentices. This type of competition keeps the apprentices engaged and on their toes.

“Sometimes we even have races to see who can set the most cement slabs the fastest,” Hardie said.

In addition to time spent learning the trade, apprentices are required to attend Gateway Community College and complete 18 credit hours of classes per year for three years.

Once apprentices graduate, they have a wide range of options available when considering work.

“There are a lot of opportunities to advance,” Hardie said. “And there are a lot of opportunities (for work) beyond just being on your hands and knees.”

The next step is a foreman, then a general foreman, then a concrete superintendent. After that, they can move on to become a field superintendent. If they choose to, they can be a general superintendent or



owner of a company.

Hardie's career path began as an apprentice in the hall 43 years ago, and now he's a business manager.

"So there is also the union side of it – apprentices can become business agents or even move on to international level positions such as organizers or regional heads."



Nunez looks forward to the opportunities to grow in her trade. She wants to learn as much as possible while pursuing an education in construction management, which is her passion, so that one day she can be a superintendent.

Nunez likes to be part of something big, which is why she has stayed in the trade for more than 10 years. Her first construction job consisted of changing out signs on Interstate 10.

The Local has been a part of many projects around the state, including University of Phoenix Stadium, Chase Field, Jobing.com

Arena, Valley Metro light rail and the Phoenix Children's Hospital, where Local 394 earned the International Award for Concrete Excellence.

Apprentices may also have the ability to be placed in construction jobs throughout the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, as well as internationally, Hardie said.

Whether apprentices are looking to explore another region of the world, or simply interested in training for a successful career, Arizona Cement Masons Apprenticeship Local 394 is the place to begin.

"I love knowing that I put my mark on something," Nunez said. "I can show people that I did that piece of concrete or that sidewalk. It's not bragging rights, it's empowering."