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Local electrical union leading way on inclusion and diversity in Boston - by Robert Adams

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Robert Adams

Boston is finally gaining ground on the racial and gender wage gaps that have held back too many families for far too long. What might surprise many Bostonians is that a relentless building boom in Boston and ongoing labor shortages have set the table for an unprecedented opportunity for women and people of color to join the middle class through their local electrical workers' union.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 103 and the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) are seizing the moment through Empower DEI, an innovative new program that's become a national model for diversifying the skilled trades. The project engages metro Boston's diverse communities through community outreach, targeted marketing, creative partnerships, and a commitment to learning from workers. Industry leaders, contractors and new Empower DEI graduates recently convened in a first-ever summit.

No one embodies the promise of Empower DEI better than Kenell Broomstein. She was already a pioneer in the Boston construction industry when five years ago, she became the first black woman to serve as a business agent in the Boston building trades. After rising in the leadership of IBEW Local 103, Kenell started her own contracting business and is now the proud owner of KB-Mac, building on her legacy of construction industry leadership. Empower DEI has been her dedicated partner in the entrepreneurial journey and she has become a powerful advocate and role model for those following in her footsteps. Kennell, a graduate of Lynn Technical Vocational High School whose journey began as a union apprentice, is now a prominent figure in the Boston construction industry and sits on multiple boards, including the IBEW National Women's Committee, and city of Boston Employment Commission.

But our work doesn't stop here. We're taking stock of the road ahead and the national labor movement is watching. Our geo-targeted apprenticeship recruitment approach, and upskilling of women- and minority-owned contractors through the Empower DEI program is expanding the participation of women and people of color in the electrical trades.

Our program takes its motto from Myles Horton and Paolo Friere's advice for pioneering social change: "We make the road by walking." In Boston, now more than ever this spirit is alive as the city is undergoing a historic explosion in new construction of housing, lab and research space, retail, and more. Enormous new green-focused communities are being built by tradespeople who will, finally, be able to afford to live in them. Our elected leaders' focus on creating a workforce and affordable housing has not only created opportunities for families to stay in the communities where they grew up, but has also created the good union jobs workers need to pay for housing, utilities, food, and transportation.

For women and people of color, these opportunities signal a seismic shift toward the middle class. IBEW and NECA are providing the necessary institutional support and resources to overcome systemic barriers, and ensuring that the industry will meet this critical moment and expand opportunities for all. Together, they have created the support needed to accelerate careers for men and women of color throughout the electrical trades by providing access, mentorship, networking,

training, and business growth opportunities.

There's a classic Kreyol proverb that says Dèyè mòn, gen mòn: Behind mountains, there are mountains. Through a targeted commitment to fostering equity in the electrical industry, we will scale these mountains together and ensure that the industry reflects the communities where we work and that all who work in our ranks will share in the rewards.

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