

Women in Nontraditional Workplace Roles: Marla Johnson



The TWU has a long history of representing women who work in nontraditional workplace roles like Aircraft Maintenance Technicians (AMT) and giving the space for women to grow throughout their careers as leaders in the workplace. In this issue of the Express, we are featuring Marla Johnson, a longtime Aircraft Maintenance Technician based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, with American Airlines.

What is your job title and where do you work?

I'm the Vice President of TWU Local 514 and an Aircraft Maintenance Technician with American Airlines.

How long have you been a TWU member?

I've been a TWU member for 27 years.

What roles do you hold within the union?

I became Vice President in 2022. I am also active with the Women's Committee. I was a Shop Steward and an E-Board officer. I am also involved with the Employee Assistance Program.

What does The TWU mean to you?

I came from a union family. My dad was a carpenter. I knew a little bit about unions, but I had forgotten some and I didn't take advantage of being a union member for many years. I was a working single mom, and I didn't feel I had time to be involved. But I learned that being in a union gives you power and gives you a voice. The one thing The TWU does is it gives you a voice and a platform to make change in the workplace and, boy, was I in shock when I learned that. I've really grown, not only as an Airline Mechanic and as a union officer, but also as a person, even outside of work.

Tell us about the job you perform and your roles and responsibilities.

I'm a full-time Vice President and I work grievances; I work the E-Board and I manage the grievance committee. I also help with benefits, EAP and the Women's Committee. Before that, I was an Airline Mechanic out in the hangar. I worked in systems and in the

cabin, but I learned a little bit of everything out in the hangar when the planes come in. In Tulsa we do heavy checks that last 14 to 25 days. We literally tear the airplanes down to the bones and look for corrosion and perform maintenance. It's pretty incredible to see a plane fully stripped.

What made you decide to become an Aircraft Maintenance Technician?

I had family that worked at American, so I always knew about American, and knew it would be a good opportunity to work there. I've always been a little bit mechanical. I always wanted to be an auto mechanic in high school, but I was discouraged from doing that, so I went into cosmetology, did hair, and hated it. I started here as an Aircraft Cleaner, and I went to AMT school to get my certificates. It's always been in my blood. I was just detoured for a little while.

What challenges have you faced as a working woman? How many women are in your line of work?

When I started there would be one woman out of hundreds of men. It was very rare that you would see another female working side-by-side with you. We've hired many more women but it's still about three percent I believe. When you go into a new area nobody knows you and everybody stays away from you, they don't know how to treat you because you're a woman. You've just got to build that relationship and that rapport, and I also had to work twice as hard as any man just to prove that I deserve to be out there. I once had a bolt I couldn't break, and I was determined I was not going to ask for help but eventually I asked my partner, and my partner couldn't get it either and that made me feel so much better. We had to get tooling to assist. Sometimes you feel vulnerable when you ask for help but you shouldn't. As long as you pull your weight, you'll be respected.

What advice would you give to other working women?

I encourage any female out there who wants to work with their hands and get greasy and mechanical. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty to do a good job. Get out there and work your ass off, that's in anything you do, not just a TWU career. We need to voice our opinions, don't hold them in.