



LaWanda Davis: LADWP's "First Lady" of Utility Pre-Craft Trainees

By Carol Tucker

LaWanda Davis was early for her first day of work as an LADWP Utility Pre-Craft Trainee (UPCT). It was April 2011 - the first day of the first class of UPCTs. As people came in and took their seats, Davis realized she'd be the only woman among 35 people in the program.

"I was a little concerned, especially when I found out we'd be rotating to work areas that were predominantly men," said Davis. "I was 51 years old and I needed a job. I had a lot of hope when I learned we would be trained and paid and have a chance to work in a permanent position at LADWP."

Davis, who goes by the nickname L.J. (the initials of her first and middle names), is the first woman from the first UPCT class. As such, she earned the title of "First Lady."

"I feel honored to be called the 'First Lady' and proud to be part of the UPCT program representing a place for women," Davis said. Her success in the program shows that "if you challenge yourself to do what may look hard, or even impossible at the time, it can be a positive and motivating experience for you and an example to others that they can succeed as well."



L.J. Davis carries attic batting for a weatherization job while working as a UPCT.

Whether working 20 feet high on manlift, carrying 50-pound bags of cement, climbing ladders or working on rooftops, Davis never wanted to be treated differently because of her gender and never shied away from trying new things. "My mindset was that I didn't want any special privileges, that I

wanted to learn about everything that was offered to me and try to do the best I could do," she said.

Starting in 2011, the UPCT Program is a joint effort between IBEW Local 18 and LADWP, working together with community-based organizations, to provide permanent civil service jobs for people living in low-income and underserved communities of Los Angeles. "UPCT is a collaborative labor, management and community approach to provide pathways to good paying jobs, and life-changing experience is the strength of the UPCT Program," said Shawn McCloud, Assistant Business Manager of IBEW Local 18.

The UPCT is designed as a feeder class that will train skilled workers in a variety of crafts jobs at LADWP, including steam plant assistant, electrical mechanic, electrical distribution mechanic, electrical craft helper, maintenance and construction helper, water utility worker, and other civil service positions.

The goal is to provide a career path for new employees to fill critical job classes, but the program has also served as a conduit to a variety of permanent civil service jobs. Since its inception, LADWP has hired 372 UPCTs from 14 cohorts. Of those, 207 have promoted into permanent civil service positions in critical and non-critical job classes.

"We wanted to provide career paths for people who experienced difficulties finding full-time employment," said McCloud during a presentation to the Board of Water and Power Commissioners. "The program needed to be inclusive and designed so that we could address background challenges and other challenges such as getting to work. Some of these challenges even include convictions." For more difficult cases, managers will write letters to City Personnel on behalf of the UPCT candidate.

A key element of the program is getting the word out in underserved communities. "We attend job fairs and events at churches and backyards - anywhere there is a table. The UPCTs themselves give back by volunteering to work at tables in communities where they grew up, and talk about their experiences at LADWP," McCloud said. Going forward, LADWP and IBEW are working together to enhance virtual and in-person training platforms to ensure tools and resources are in place that will provide opportunities for UPCTs to be successful.

Davis had trouble finding full-time permanent employment prior to joining the UPCT program. "The places I applied to were not hiring or not responding to my applications," she said. She found part-time work at her children's school, then learned about the UPCT program as it was just being established.

Her early hopes never diminished from Day 1 as a UPCT. LaWanda relished the exposure to all types of work environments at LADWP, knowing that the experience increased her eligibility for a variety of jobs. UPCT employees rotate to different locations every six months in areas such as electrical substation construction, electrical substation maintenance, energy efficiency or weatherization work, mechanical repair shop, stores, test lab, water conservation and water distribution among other areas.

Never afraid to try something new to advance her marketability, Davis earned licenses to run a forklift and manlift, learned to use a harness and to drive an F150 truck, or pie wagon to transport supplies for the Department's Home Energy Improvement Program (HEIP).

While working in HEIP, Davis even took the initiative to learn a little Russian. Her team was performing weatherization work at an apartment building where the occupants spoke only Russian and didn't understand when the LADWP workers tried to give them a free device to monitor their electricity use.

Ever the go-getter, Davis downloaded an app on her phone that translated English words and phrases into Russian. “I introduced myself and explained we were giving them a device to monitor their electricity, and it was free. They understood and were very happy to have it,” she said.

Davis enjoyed learning the trades but also knew it was important to take civil service tests and apply for every job for which she felt qualified. She had honed her typing skills since seventh grade, so the Clerk Typist position was a perfect fit. In 2014, she was picked up permanently from the Clerk Typist position list of candidates, and hired to work in the Executive Office of the Water System Personnel Division under Linda Le, who is now LADWP’s Chief Administrative Officer.

Since then, Davis was promoted to Senior Administrative Clerk Typist, working in a district office as a timekeeper. She recently transferred again to a new position in Power Transmission and Distribution. “Being able to rotate and network in many different areas gives you a lot of exposure to people in the Department if you’re willing to learn something new,” she said. “Even if you only work with someone for six months you’ve made a connection.”

“My experience as a UPCT is something that no amount of money could buy, and nothing could replace what this program has provided for me and my family,” Davis said.

Feature photo of LaWanda Davis by Art Mochizuki