

Speaker advocates for more women in the trades



By Bill Kilpatrick

Jamie McMillan, founder of Kickass Careers, has an empowering message for women: "Don't you want to be strong independent women and fix your own things? I'm not going to count on a boy." Being independent is something that McMillan knows a lot about and she has worked hard her whole life to empower herself to be independent. She is one of only two per cent of women iron workers and one of only four percent of women who work in the trades. She has overcome numerous adversities and challenges to get where she is today. She knows what it feels like to experience discrimination and stereotyping and currently is struggling to change the workplace environment so more women will feel welcomed in the trades and do not have to experience what she did. McMillan spoke about walking onto a work site as an iron worker and having her male colleagues make comments like, "looks like the secretary is here," but she was always quick to fire back at these attempts to demean her. While McMillan speaks about empowering women she is super passionate about anyone entering the trades and these were the messages that she sent to students during her presentation at North Hastings High school on Jan. 12. McMillan struggled for most of her life to fit in and a big part of her struggle was that she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder which made school, and relationships in general, a nightmare for her. In primary school she was picked on and bullied, telling the students, "You would not believe the mental health trauma that caused because people were such jerks." She was never very good at math, science, English, or history and her self esteem was at rock bottom. All McMillan cared about at that time was being popular and she dreaded entering high school, but, she says, looking back it was what indirectly started her on her path to the trades. First, said McMillan, it was a drama class where she learned that her "ADHD was a superpower," next was a media class that helped build her self-esteem, but given that she was a bit of a tom-boy who grew up swinging a hammer, it was in an automotive shop and woodworking class that she began to come into her own. "I learned the basics of fixing things which is something you all should have," said McMillan, who really wanted to be able to fix things herself and it was this desire for independence that pushed her to take an automotive class where she was only one of two girls out of 28 boys. But it was the woodworking class where McMillan learned a valuable life lesson: don't let people tell you what you can or can't do. She proposed a difficult project to build, a bed/workstation and her teacher told her that it was unrealistic and that she couldn't build it. It was at this point that McMillan looked at the students in the crowd and said, "Now in life we have two choices. We can either let things discourage us and get insecure about it and walk away from it or we can step up and say I'm gonna prove you guys wrong. For the first time in my life I wanted something so bad that even though I was this insecure girl that hated being picked on and bullied I decided, "You know what? Screw the guys. I'm gonna use their negativity as my motivation to prove them wrong because probably none of them can swing a hammer as good as I can. So, I begged my teacher to let me do it and he said, 'yes' and I finished the project and I completed the biggest project that they have even seen completed by a girl in a male dominated class." Yet despite her success no one ever encouraged her to continue with the trades nor did anyone ever tell her about

apprenticeships. When it came time to complete her Grade 12 compulsory credits McMillan decided that school was not for her and she dropped out and eventually tried multiple careers and went on what she called a "convoluted journey" before she found her calling in the trades. At the behest of her parents she trained as a Personal Support Worker, but dealing with death was not something she could handle so she moved to Toronto and began working at a bar, became a beer representative, and a club promoter where she made great money and was finally popular, but she still felt like something was missing. Only after a bout of depression, some tough love from a friend, and a chance meeting with a high school rival who told her about an apprenticeship program at her union did she finally begin to take control of her life. McMillan became an iron worker and, according to information provided at the presentation, from there she branched out to also become a journeyman, an apprentice boiler maker, and now is also a motivational speaker, an outreach specialist, author, visionary and an advocate for the skilled trades, technology, mental health, homelessness, and youth. "This [the skilled trades]," said McMillan, "is now the fastest way to become a millionaire. One third of your life is spent working ? one third of your life is going to be a long time, so make sure you find a career you love, because I will tell you, if you don't it's going to effect your mental health every day." For McMillan the trades have opened many doors, allowed her to travel the world and has given her the confidence, resilience, and determination to overcome any obstacle. "Some people have told me that girls shouldn't be in skilled trades. Oh, I love those people. Remember the guys in class that told me I'd never build that bed and I did, and I proved them wrong. That was great. Every time I get picked on, bullied, and bothered in the trades, because it happens. It doesn't just happen to girls it happens to everybody, but being a minority in the trade we get picked on a little more [?] People say that women can't be in the trades, and I say, "Oh ya, watch us."