

Woman Seeks To Break Through “Trash Ceiling” In Bid For Sanitation Job



[Keith E. Lee Mar 4, 2016](#) · 4 min read

We Can Haul It!



In honor of Women's History Month, Decatur, GA resident Brianna Aspen is attempting to break through the so-called "Trash Ceiling" for women in the sanitation field. Ms. Aspen, who is currently unemployed but holds a Ph.D. in Women's Studies from Agnes Scott college, says it was her commitment to feminist theory in the context of the world as classroom that was a decisive factor in choosing this particular career path.

"When I told my parents I wanted to be a trash man...er trash person, they thought I was crazy. But I believe this is an area where I can really make a difference in what it means to be gendered in the world today."

Raised in Buckhead, GA, Brianna says her parents are "*blatantly rich*" and that coming from a world of such privilege has caused her to "*pine for some kind of authenticity*" in her life. "*I first realized my calling as a feminist to break down this barrier to true equality while freegan dumpster diving. A garbage truck pulled up, but thankfully the driver noticed I was inside, and when he yelled, 'Hey! Whattaya doin' in there?', I explained that I was rescuing food. He then suggested I go get a job. So I thought to myself: Okay, I'll take yours.*" She has applied for a position with the DeKalb County Sanitation Department, but has yet to hear back.

Sanitation workers do the fourth most dangerous job in the country, suffering more fatalities than even police officers. And

according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, occupational deaths tend to be concentrated in male-dominated industries like garbage hauling (90%). But to those who would suggest there are innate physical differences between men and woman which might make it more dangerous for her to work in such a labor-intensive job (each worker lifts five to seven tons of garbage per day) Brianna answers, *“Women are, if anything, tougher than men and so can be combat infantry officers, special forces operators, etc.”* She goes on, asserting that, *“The biggest obstacle to women in the sanitation field is the bunch of guys sitting together around a table making all the decisions.”*

According to available statistics women disproportionately are failing to obtain positions in sanitation. As women’s educational attainment has increased the work they perform has also changed, but a difference may still result from discrimination in the workplace or subtler discrimination about what types of job choices women can make. And women often lack self-belief, which leads to less risk taking and more cautious career choices. Indeed, women still are segregated into “pink-collar” jobs. Studies conclude that in the “she-conomy” the inclusion of women in the top ranks of company leadership has had a direct and positive impact on risk management. *“If that’s the case in the boardroom than I believe that should carry over to the garbage truck on the street, too.”* Said Ms. Aspen.

Despite the lack of a sponsor who would promote her skills and abilities to the county Brianna plans to push on anyway; maybe in a leadership or spokesperson role. Sanitation workers in DeKalb County are currently attempting to unionize and Brianna believes that her education and background can be a positive force in articulating their concerns. *“Having a job is a fundamental right in this country. And unions are the voice of working people, so that should be a right too.”*

Although Brianna doesn't want children — *“What if it was male? I'd be contributing to the patriarchy.”* — she cites that although the government has acted as a catalyst for promoting gender equality perspectives and practices by heightening awareness of gender inequality and the adverse effects of gender inequity on women, children, families, communities and the nation as a whole, the United States offers virtually no institutionalized support for working families as women struggle to balance demands from work and demands from home. In the 1990s the US Congress enacted the Glass Ceiling Act establishing the Glass Ceiling Commission. The commission found that there are societal, governmental and business structural barriers to the employment of women in the sanitation service sector. And even if women do overcome the recruitment barrier, they are often stymied by what the commission called “a climate of barriers”, such as differing gender communication styles, behaviors, and ways of socializing, different standards for performance evaluation for women and men and little or no access to informal networks of

communication. In a *Wall Street Journal*/Gallup survey, women were asked what they consider to be the most serious obstacle in their careers; the most frequent response was simply “being a woman”.

One might wonder how Brianna will survive and thrive in a macho world of back slaps, sports talk and cat calling as women’s typical communication style is more warm, less directed, and more mitigated than men’s. This style of communication can lower perceptions about women’s abilities. However, if a woman exhibits too much assertiveness, which is contradictory to the stereotype, her influence and likability may be lowered, so this could be a challenge to overcome. *“In this post-colonial world there is no room for exclusivity in any career path. It’s my way of claiming solidarity with Presidential hopeful and ‘shero’ Hillary Clinton. So much has been accomplished yet the struggle continues. Women have come so far, but we will not obtain true equality until the old white men who dominate this culture die off.”*

Until they do I commend this fierce female for her courageous stance embodying the bravest tactics with which to fight against this oppressive, consumerist, male dominated society. You go girl!

Originally published in Stomp and Stammer magazine April 2015.

