

Creating a Rosier Future for Women in Manufacturing

During World War II, the iconic “Rosie the Riveter” campaign spurred women across the nation to join the workforce in support of America’s defense and aviation industries. Rosie has been a cultural phenomenon ever since, inspiring and empowering generations of girls and women in all walks of life.

Despite an initial 65% surge in the female workforce and subsequent successes, women still only account for 29% of manufacturing labor in the United States. As a result, Rosie is being called upon to redouble her efforts in a new program launched earlier this year by MACNY, the Manufacturers Association of Central New York.

MACNY’s “Real Life Rosies” initiative provides critical training and support services for women interested in pursuing manufacturing careers. It also connects them with top manufacturers in New York—and the potential for good-paying jobs.

Backed by a grant of nearly \$1 million from Empire State Development’s Office of Strategic Workforce Development, the 12-week program features a mix of in-person and virtual classes. Participants must be at least 18 years old—the oldest Rosie to date is 68—eligible to work in the U.S. and able to attend classes.



Real Life Rosies touring a local manufacturing plant. (Images provided by MACNY)

opportunities for on-the-job training and college classes.”

Real Life Rosies is New York’s first direct-entry program for women in advanced manufacturing. Such classes give participants an opportunity to interview with companies that provide registered apprenticeship.

To ensure success, MACNY forged partnerships with Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC), Working Solutions and other community-based organizations. Utica, N.Y.-based MVCC helped tailor the program’s curriculum to the requirements of entry-level manufacturing positions.

Riveting Partners

Now in its third cohort, Real Life Rosies has graduated 23 women with another dozen currently enrolled. The majority of students have little or no experience in manufacturing.

“We chose to target women for this project because they’re underrepresented in manufacturing,” says Colleen Blagg, MACNY’s manager of apprenticeship and workforce development. Noting the huge gender gap in manufacturing, she says women are an “untapped resource” for employers.

“We’ve been hearing for years that manufacturers have struggled to fill middle-skilled positions, including skilled trades, due to factors like baby boomer retirements and a focus on college education as the only viable pathway to a rewarding career,” Blagg says. “MACNY’s workforce development strategy addresses this challenge through registered apprenticeships, helping employers build a skilled workforce by upskilling entry-level employees and providing

“The curriculum these ambitious women learn covers topics that may have previously been unfamiliar,” notes Tina Betz, instructor for the Women in Manufacturing/Real-Life Rosies and MVCC’s FIRST Robotics Program Coordinator.

This includes overviews of robotics and automation, CNC technology, additive versus subtractive manufacturing, lean manufacturing, quality control and tolerances, OSHA standards, workplace layouts and ergonomics. Participants also are taught important soft skills such as self-promotion, local and online community building, writing and refining a resume, and interview skills.

Rosies also can access Tooling U-SME classes and take the certification manufacturing associate (CMfgA) exam.

Tour de Workforce

Through its industry partners, MACNY also arranges tours of 10 local manufacturing facilities. This gives students a first-hand look at various jobs, including a mix of traditional manual

roles, as well as technical and professional positions in design, marketing, administration, finance, sales and cybersecurity. These broader opportunities help make manufacturing more appealing and accessible to a diverse range of workers.

The tours are what Yawa Zewou enjoys most. “Whenever we do a tour, there’s a shift I see, like a change in attitude from the participants,” says Zewou, who joined MACNY earlier this year as the team’s newest workforce development specialist. In her short time with MACNY, she’s seen initially hesitant students become excited about manufacturing careers. In many cases, these plant tours opened their eyes to the diverse opportunities available in the industry.

Support Services

Real Life Rosies goes beyond mere job placement; it offers comprehensive support services to ensure women can thrive in these roles. This includes mentorship and accessible wrap-around services to help break down barriers that might otherwise hinder success. Working Solutions provides matching funds for:

- Childcare that helps make participation feasible for those with families.
- Industry-specific clothing (including steel-toed boots).
- Transportation assistance to ensure participants can commute to and from classes.

Additionally, a stipend of \$1,000 is offered upon graduation. Whether it’s covering Uber expenses or reimbursement for a babysitter, Real Life Rosies offers support to help prepare women for sustaining careers.

Just ask Toni Aho, a 45-year-old mother of three and a recent Real Life Rosies graduate. Aho first heard of the program at Semikron Danfoss, where she worked as a production operator making power modules and has since become an apprentice. She wanted to learn more about how machines operate so she could work her way up to become a process technician or an engineer. But with limited experience, Aho felt she would have been too embarrassed to ask the right questions at a regular trade school or college.



“I showed up my first day at the Rosie program and was nervous until I walked in the room and sat through the first class,” Aho confides. “It was women from all walks of life . . . I learned everything, starting with what a hammer was, all the way to robotics. We took tours of different facilities and saw the various types of manufacturing. It was just the thing I needed to boost my self-confidence to apply for an apprenticeship and further my career.”

A Model for Success

By showcasing the myriad opportunities available, building supportive communities and emphasizing flexibility, Real Life Rosies is contributing to the transformation of women’s roles throughout the manufacturing workforce. It highlights multiple paths to successful careers and aims to inspire and support women on their journey.

“At the graduation held in their honor (after completing the 12-week course), the self-confidence, sense of accomplishment and pride of all our Rosies is amazing to see. They feel anything is possible,” Betz beams.

And the MACNY initiative could soon lead to similar programs. “This program can easily be duplicated and replicated,” says Toni Neary, director of community engagement and workforce innovation at Tooling U-SME.

For now, community engagement and word-of-mouth play a key part in the success story, with many participants referring friends and colleagues. At the same time, a growing outreach effort is underway.

“Part of generating support for this program was reaching out to women and meeting them where they’re at,” Blagg explains. “So, we’re going to different community organizations, we’re talking to women who may be in shelters, we’re talking to women at the food bank, we’re going to all these different locations and directly engaging them where there is a need.”

Such efforts are crucial to encourage women to consider manufacturing as a viable career option. While the program’s namesake fictional character is a lot to live up to, Real Life Rosies are furthering her legacy every day. 📧

**TRANSFORM YOUR
WORKFORCE**



info@toolingu.com or 866.706.8665