

# Training the Next Generation of Skilled Tradespeople

An Interview with Shannon Gerber, Executive Director, The Home Depot Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** As executive director of The Home Depot Foundation, Shannon Gerber leads The Home Depot's philanthropic strategy, volunteer efforts and employee assistance program. She joined The Home Depot in 2002 and, prior to joining The Home Depot Foundation, she spent 13 years with The Home Depot in corporate communications. Most recently, she served as the senior director of events management, where she led large-scale events for the company, as well as The Home Depot Foundation's fundraising events. In this role, Gerber's team led the fundraising strategy and helped raise millions of dollars to further the Foundation's work. Previously, she worked with The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company in positions of increasing responsibility in events management. Gerber has served on the advisory board of Make-A-Wish Georgia and is an active volunteer through Team Depot, Atlanta Community Food Bank, Safehouse Outreach, Atlanta Furniture Bank and other organizations. She earned a BS in business management from University of Phoenix.



Shannon Gerber

**FOUNDATION BRIEF** The Home Depot Foundation (<https://corporate.homedepot.com/foundation>) works to improve the homes and lives of U.S. veterans, train skilled tradespeople to fill the labor gap, and support communities impacted by natural disasters. Since 2011, the Foundation has invested more than \$400 million in veteran causes and improved more than 50,000 veteran homes and facilities. The Foundation has pledged to invest half of a billion dollars in veteran causes by 2025 and \$50 million in training the next generation of skilled tradespeople through the Path to Pro program.

## Will you highlight the history of The Home Depot Foundation (THDF) and how the Foundation has evolved?

For the past decade, the Foundation has worked to serve U.S. military veterans and help rebuild communities when disasters strike. In 2018, The Home Depot Foundation expanded its mission and launched its trades training program, Path to Pro.

The Home Depot Foundation is proud to serve those who have served and focuses on ending veteran homelessness, improving veteran housing through critical home repairs, and building accessible smart homes for combat-wounded veterans.

We have invested more than \$400 million in veteran causes to date which has helped us and our national nonprofit partners build, renovate and enhance more than 50,000 veteran homes and facilities, and provide critical assistance to veterans and their families. We are deeply committed to serving veterans and have pledged to invest half of a billion dollars in veteran causes by 2025.

Our disaster relief program supports communities impacted by natural disasters with immediate relief and long-term rebuilding. In 2021, the Foundation committed more than \$7 million to disaster response in areas impacted by fires, hurricanes and tornadoes.

Most recently, the Foundation has pledged to being part of the solution to bridging the skilled labor gap by investing \$50 million in training the next generation of skilled tradespeople through the Path to Pro program. The program offers free industry-recognized training opportunities for young adults, high school students, separating military service members and underserved communities.

## How do you define The Home Depot Foundation's purpose?

The Home Depot Foundation works to improve the homes and lives of U.S. veterans, train skilled tradespeople to fill the labor gap and support communities impacted by natural disasters. We form strategic partnerships with leaders in these respective arenas to ensure that we're directly connecting to the communities that need support, and give grants that help elevate their work, creating a lasting impact. We do that through our nonprofit partners and our associate volunteer force, Team Depot.

## You mentioned The Home Depot Foundation's Path to Pro trades training program which launched under your leadership. How did that come to life?

The Foundation has been monitoring the skilled labor gap for years and has been working with our nonprofit partners to develop scalable solutions to this growing gap. In 2018, The Home Depot Foundation announced a \$50 million commitment to train the next generation of skilled tradespeople to support the growing demand. At the time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that there were 158,000 unfilled construction sector jobs in the U.S. That number was expected to increase significantly as tradespeople retire over the next decade. The

ratio of construction job openings to hirings, as measured by the Department of Labor, was also at its highest level since 2007. The skilled trades industry is still facing a growing labor shortage today, with 83 percent of contractors still having trouble finding skilled workers according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Construction Index. Additionally, there are currently more than 300,000 skilled labor job openings.

The program's official name, Path to Pro, was introduced in December 2020 to continue addressing this growing need, along with addressing the barriers to pursuing education. With this expansion, we aimed to continue to not only generate interest in the skilled trades through awareness campaigns, but connect skilled tradespeople with jobs and careers. We work closely with our partners who are leaders in the space, including Home Builders Institute (HBI) and Construction Ready (formerly Construction Education Foundation of Georgia), which has helped our trades training program grow to having programs in more than 30 states, introduce more than 15,000 people to the skilled trades, and certify more than 5,000 participants in its first few years.



The Path to Pro program serves military veterans

**The Foundation is known for its philanthropic efforts in support of veterans. Why does a program like this make sense for separating military members and what has been the impact to date?**

Over a decade of work in the veteran space gave us a first-hand look into the challenges that separating service members face when transitioning into civilian life. Many service members already possess the skills needed to succeed in the skilled trades as a result of their military training, so connecting members with certification and in-turn career opportunities just made sense.

In 2018, The Home Depot Foundation and Home Builders Institute launched its joint, 12-week trades training program for separating military members on one U.S. military base. Today, the program provides industry-recognized PACT and OSHA 10 certifications on 10 U.S. military bases across the nation. Last year, more than 1,000 military veterans were trained through this program.

**“Shop class” was beginning to feel like a memory of the ’80s, but the Foundation is working hard to bring it back to high school students. Why is training the next generation of skilled tradespeople so important to your organization and what does that part of your program look like?**

Data shows that there is a generation of skilled tradespeople retiring from the industry, which widens an already large gap in the workforce. This gives us an opportunity to connect with young people who may be exploring options for their education after high school that doesn't include the traditional four-year college or university. Our programs offer hands-on experiences to students to help them learn what skilled trades field is the best fit for them, and even gives them the opportunity to train under industry professionals who can help lead them to meaningful careers. The Foundation works with the Construction Ready and Home Builders Institute to provide skilled training courses at the K-12 level in schools across the country.

Recently, The Home Depot Foundation expanded its Path to Pro program to more than 250 schools in over 30 states. In 2021, the Foundation's programs began serving more than 30 Title 1 schools, where over 40 percent of the students live in low-income communities.

In an effort to help remove financial weight that prevents young people from pursuing an education, the Foundation launched the Path to Pro scholarship program in May 2021, where it granted \$250,000 in financial assistance to high school seniors and graduates entering or currently enrolled in building construction trade programs. In 2021, The Home Depot was the Southeast sponsor of SkillsUSA's National Signing Day, and the Foundation granted \$30,000 in scholarships to support six students pursuing a career in the building and construction trades.

There are so many talented young people out there that are looking for a way to hone in on their skills – they just need an outlet to do it.



*Path to Pro academy*

**As Path to Pro evolves, your intentionality around diversifying the trades industry has become a driving factor. How did this become an additional focus for the Foundation?**

The conversation surrounding the widening gap in the skilled workforce led us to look into the variables that were contributing to this shortage, and what demographics needed support as we worked to bridge this gap. We found an overwhelming amount of data that shed light on the diversity and opportunity gaps within the skilled workforce. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2020 shows that skilled labor industries are dominated by white males, while Black people and women are disproportionately under-represented. For example, Black tradespeople represent only six percent of the construction, architecture, and engineering workforces. In 2020, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported data showing only 11 percent of construction workers and 27 percent of architecture and engineering professionals are women. Furthermore, the National Association of Home Builders' 2019 Builder Member Census shared that just 9 percent of their members are women and less than 0.5 percent are Black.

It became clear that the Foundation, and the skilled workforce, could not effectively bridge the labor gap without addressing the diversity and opportunity gaps in these industries. We've formed partnerships with organizations that have a direct line to these communities, like Girls Scouts of the USA and 100 Black Men of America, to help introduce underserved and underrepresented communities to the skilled trades.

Most recently, the Foundation launched the community-based Path to Pro academy program, which offers training and certification for diverse adult populations and underserved communities. This program brings together students of differing ages, genders, races and backgrounds. Path to Pro academies in Denver and Orlando have successfully trained more than 400 students, and a Sacramento academy program is scheduled to open in 2022.

This spring, the Foundation and Girl Scouts of the USA are joining forces to host the first-ever joint construction workshops for Cadette, Senior and Ambassador level Girl Scouts (8th – 12th grades). This program will engage troops throughout Atlanta, Denver and Houston, providing hands-on experience with carpentry and other building construction trades. These skilled trades workshops will be led by female industry professionals and will offer career guidance and additional education touchpoints for young women seeking trades training opportunities.

Last year, HBI and THDF partnered with 100 Black Men of America to launch a pilot trades training program serving under-resourced communities across Atlanta, Philadelphia and the Bay Area in California. The program offers skill building workshops, work experience, internship opportunities and industry-recognized PACT certifications. The programs are set to prepare Black youth and other minorities for meaningful careers and will be facilitated through 100 Black Men of America's existing after-school programs.

Additionally, last summer, The Home Depot Foundation activated a novel partnership with its hometown nonprofit partner, Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs (RICE). RICE is driven by community impact and devoted to empowering Black entrepreneurs and small business owners. The Foundation will provide construction support for an outdoor creativity space at the RICE facility called, “The Yard.”

**How valuable is it to work with industry-leading nonprofit partners to help you tackle this work?**

Our partners are instrumental to the work that we do across all of the Foundation's pillars, from veteran homelessness to disaster response to trades training. We realize that we can't tackle all this work alone. Partnering with industry leaders like Home Builders Institute (HBI) and Construction Ready has helped us connect with people that are looking to break into the skilled trades industry and working closely with them has helped us improve our work year after year. ●