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BY KENDRA HENSON

City Water Tunnel Number Three is the largest engineering project in the Western hemisphere. A work that's been in progress since 1970, the tunnel will be an adjunct to the first two water tunnels already in existence in New York City.

Despite the almost unimaginable size of this construction project, it's probably gone unnoticed and unknown by the ordinary, run-of-the-mill civilian.

That's where Marty Pottenger comes in.

The 48-year-old "jack-of-all-trades" actor, storyteller, tradeswoman, artist, and lesbian will be in Vermont in April, partially to give the keynote address at the Northern New England Tradeswomen Conference. But she also plans to reveal all – including tidbits about the connections about storytellers, sandhogs, and water – in her one-woman show "Making City Water Tunnel #3."

Pottenger's focus in this performance art piece is less on the tunnel itself than on civil engineering in its most literal sense. Having interviewed many people working on different aspects of the project, she uses the photos, sweat, and tears – but mostly the stories – of the men and women working on the tunnel to construct a true sense of significance, connection, and community.

The artist comes by her interest in the trades honestly; she grew up in a community of tradesmen and spent her time observing the nature of those who surrounded her. "There was something different about these men that I liked and connected with," she said. "They carried themselves differently with a sense of pride and accomplishment. They didn't seem as worried as the middle class men."

Some of her fondest memories are of times spent with her dad, building things together. "Construction work brings out the best in people," she said. "People light up in a particular way when they talk about working with their hands and using their sweat."

That's not to say Pottenger was always encouraged to break traditional gender roles. Kindergarten wasn't exactly a cakewalk. "I remember playing with the trucks and cars in school and some of my classmates started laughing at me because they thought girls shouldn't play with trucks," she recalls. "My feelings were hurt so bad that I could only think to hit them with the truck!"

Still, after waitressing for several years as a teenager, Pottenger decided to go into the trades herself, and worked in the Masons Union in Florida in 1972. She was one of the first women to go into a union. But just settling for the job didn't occur to her.

"I actually ended up leaving that position because of disputes over wages," she said. "I wasn't being paid enough, so I quit and went back to waitressing."

When she turned 35, Pottenger decided to do a "spot check" on her life to see whether she was exploring all the directions she wanted. She became involved in political organizing, and talked herself into conquering a fear of performing.

"I was scared to perform, but I knew I loved it. I began focusing on issues that were of importance to me such as racism, gender, equal rights."

That's when Pottenger got to act on another childhood realization: the power of stories and performance to open people up.

"I remember one time putting a wastepaper basket on my head and dancing one day when my mom was feeling low, and how that made her laugh," she said. "It changed her whole mood. All I had to do was be a silly kid, and it



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would have this amazingly positive effect on people."

"Stories are as unique as we are," said Pottenger. "They have a power to communicate and connect across differences. Stories also have a healing power as the telling of stories and listening to stories are very deeply human."

Pottenger performs "Making City Water Tunnel #3" at the Flynn Theatre on Saturday, April 8, at 8pm.

She speaks at the Northern New England Tradeswomen Conference in Montpelier, April 7-9. (Conference info: (800) 639-1472 or (802) 476-4040.) She will be appearing on VPR's Switchboard on Tuesday, April 4, along with representatives from tradeswomen organizations. ▼