ADVERTISEMENT

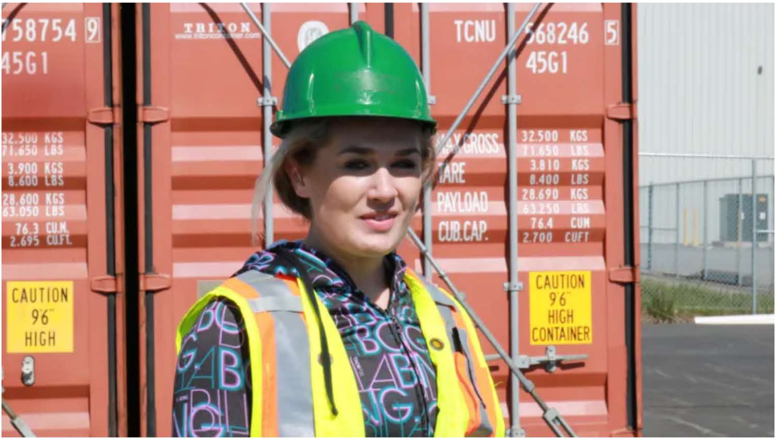
Unlock Advanced Automation with Pro
Get Pro
ManyChat
Upgrade to Pro
Open

New Brunswick

Meet the first 3 women training to work one of Port Saint John's most dangerous jobs

Got excellent upper body strength and strong backbone? Container lashing could be for you

Julia Wright · CBC News · Posted: Jun 07, 2021 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: June 7, 2021



Hanna Graham, 20, comes from a family of longshoremen. She recently became one of the first women to pass the container lashing test at Port Saint John. It's the second job she's ever had. (Julia Wright/CBC)

407 comments

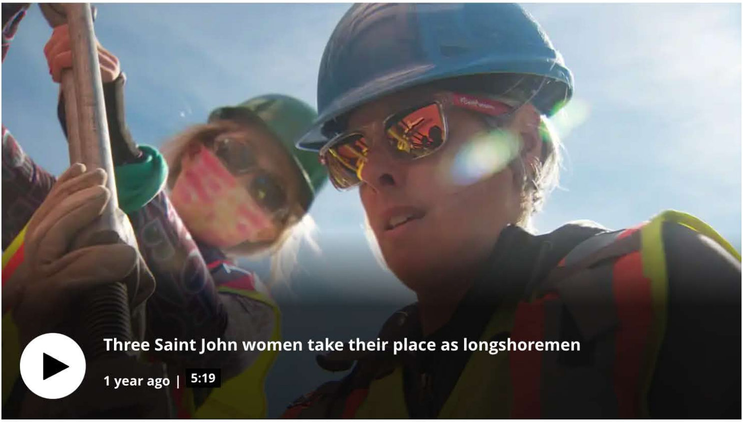
Extreme, 16-metre tides aren't the only super-sized thing about the Port City.

Saint John is Atlantic Canada's largest port by volume, handling 28 million metric tonnes of cargo annually.

Everything on the west side docks — from the container ships, to the stacks of containers, to the blue cranes designed to move those containers — is gigantic.

With all those big, moving parts, "you can get squished just as easy as stepping in the wrong place," said Hanna Graham. "If you don't watch where you're going, you probably will die."

WATCH | Three women take their place as longshoremen:


Three Saint John women take their place as longshoremen
1 year ago | 5:19

Historically done by men, "lashing" is one of Saint John port's most dangerous jobs.

All that can be intimidating when, like Graham, you're learning to do one of the "most physically demanding, and also dangerous" jobs at the port, as Terry Wilson, president and business agent of ILA Local 273, puts it.

That job? Container lashing. Graham, along with fellow trainees Guylaine Cyr and Liz Kramer, are the first women in Port Saint John history to pass the test to do it.

"They did great," said Troy Elliot, a longshoreman of 30 years.

"It's a very strenuous job. It takes a lot of endurance and strength under different climates. It could be cold, minus 35, hands freezing, whatever. But the job's gotta get done."

MSC ALYSSA
PANAMA

In 2020, some 76,500 TEU's - or 20-foot shipping container equivalents - passed through Port Saint John. The containers can be filled with anything from scrap metal and potash, to vehicles, coffee and electronics. (Julia Wright/CBC)

Container what?

Container lashing might need a little explanation for the layperson.

When big ships arrive in port, all those shipping containers aren't just sitting loose on the deck. They're lashed, or locked, together with a complicated system of metal bars, turnbuckles and other gear that keeps them from sliding around in high seas.

When they arrive at Port Saint John, all that lashing needs to come off. It's one of the few heavy jobs that can't be done by machines.

Guylaine Cyr, Liz Kramer and Hanna Graham are the first three women to pass the container-lashing test at Port Saint John. 'We're happy that they passed and hope that they'll stick around and make a career out of working on the waterfront here,' says Terry Wilson with ILA Local 273. (Julia Wright/CBC)

Lifting and lugging bars that can weigh as much as 50 to 60 pounds each, container lashers get the containers "ready for the crane to lift off and put it in the yard to be shipped out all over Canada, or the [United] States, or whatever," said Elliot.

Historically, lashing was a man's job.

"We're trying to diversify the workforce, get some women in it," said Wilson.

In April 2021, the port was trying to revise its referral list — the entry level for people who want to work in the longshore industry.

Out of 140 applications, there were only seven women. Out of those seven, only Graham, Cyr, and Kramer passed the test. (There were plenty of men, Wilson points out, who didn't pass either.)

"It would be nice to have a good ratio of women on the waterfront," Wilson said.

Fishing workout

Liz Kramer is no stranger to hard work on the water. Before her lashing debut, she worked on the harbour just off the west side docks, fishing gaspereau and shad.

"You get a workout, that's for sure. If it wasn't for my fishing workout, I might not have the strength to lift that pole," Kramer said.

"I used to be a computer analyst many years ago. After I had a child, I decided I wanted to work outdoors."

E-8E-7
E-8E-7
Hapag-Ll

Lashers work in teams in tight quarters, and with cranes working overhead lifting heavy containers, safety is paramount. (Julia Wright/CBC)

All told, she said, "I don't think there's anything better than this. Being outdoors, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, even if you do have some hard work. There's nothing better for me — nothing. And the pay's not so bad, either."

That said, she's not giving up fishing anytime soon.

"I can see myself doing this full time, sure. But as long as there's fish in the sea, I'll be working that, too."

Like fishing, Kramer said, the port is "typically a male-dominated workplace. But you just deal with the men like you do in a normal day. And everybody is actually pretty nice and pretty helpful around here."

CMA CGM
CMA CGM
APL
CMA CGM
CMA CGM
E-8E-7
E-8E-7

Kramer, who passed the container-lashing test on April 22, currently works in the fishing industry. 'Being outdoors, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, even if you do have some hard work, there's nothing better for me. Nothing,' she said. (Julia Wright/CBC)

From welding to the waterfront

Guylaine Cyr applied to the port when she heard from a friend they were looking for women who wanted to work.

Cyr, who was studying business full time at the University of New Brunswick's Saint John campus, thought the job "could be a good in-between [job] in case I don't get a job right away when I graduate," she said.

But she also has a thing for physical labour.

F-6F-5
DP WORLD
DP WORLD

'Everybody is actually pretty nice and pretty helpful around here,' said Kramer. DP World manager of operations Daryl Bettle and his old dog, Max, are two of those friendly faces. (Julia Wright/CBC)

She studied blacksmithing at the School of the Arts and Craft in Nelson, B.C., and did a welding certificate in La Pocatiere, Q.C., before trying lashing.

"In society," Cyr said, "we think we are a long way from where we were in the 1970s in terms of women in the trades, which is true.

"But there is a lot of work to be done. Equity of pay, how we are treated. It's not something that we talk about a lot," she said.

"I would love to see more women in the port for sure."

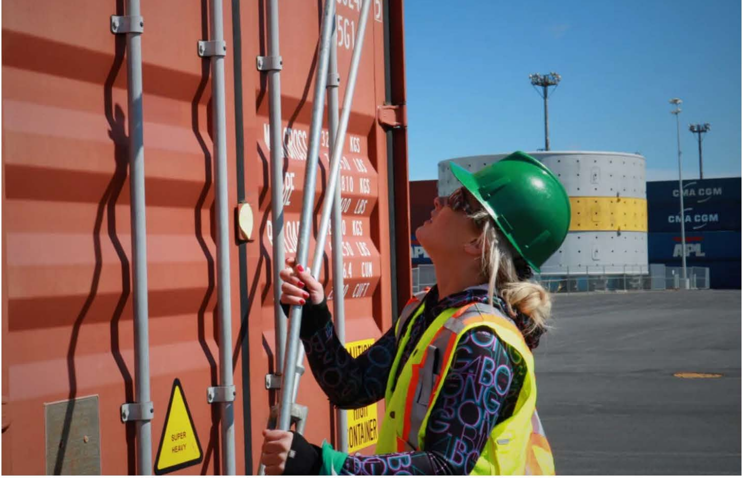
Cyr studied welding and blacksmithing before she decided to add container-lashing to her resume. (Julia Wright/CBC)

A family affair

For twenty-year-old Hanna Graham, working at the Port has been a lifelong dream.

"I come from a family of longshoremen," she said. Now, she's working alongside her grandfather, a longshoreman of many decades. It's the second job she's ever had.

"It started as a joke when I was a kid," she said, "and it seemed to form more and more into a reality as I seen it was easy for me."



After passing the lashing test, Graham is now working at the port alongside her grandfather, a longshoreman for several decades. 'I definitely see it as a full career. I don’t have any plans on going anywheres else,' she said. (Julia Wright/CBC)

Before she started, she said, her grandfather gave her a few words of advice.

"Swear a lot. And don't take anything personal," she said. "Just do your job. As long as you're doing you, and not hurting anybody and no one is hurting you, you're A-1."

The job, she said, "it's definitely worth it if you have the backbone to handle it.... It is definitely empowering, and pays off."

For people who are strong and don't mind the work, a lasher can make a good living — with a starting wage of $33 an hour.

Not every day is beautiful and sunny on the Saint John harbour. (Julia Wright/CBC)

Getting hours as a non-union employee, however, can be an issue.

"It's on work demand," Wilson said. "When there's a ship in, everybody's working. If we go three, four days without a ship, there's only a small group of people working."

Graham has some advice for other women looking to get into the trades.

"Do some pushups and get down here. If you can lift that bar, all the power to you."

Corrections

- A previous version of this story stated that Saint John is Canada's largest port by volume. In fact, it is Atlantic Canada's largest port by volume.
  Jun 07, 2021 12:01 PM AT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Wright

Host, Information Morning Saint John

Julia Wright is the host of Information Morning Saint John on CBC Radio 1. She previously worked as a digital reporter focused on stories from southwestern New Brunswick. She has a masters degree in English from McGill University, and has been with the CBC since 2016. You can reach her at julia.wright@cbc.ca.