What we need is more women-run garages in Toronto," says Anna Willats. She's sitting in her office at George Brown College, where she teaches as part of the Assaulted Women & Children's Advocate Program (AWCCA). The walls are covered with posters from years past: Pride Marches, job placements and class lists, demonstrating a long career of helping other people find their calling. She continues, "There's one or two [garages] existing now, but really, I'm a feminist. I'm all about making sure that women are represented in any area we want to go."

Willats is in the habit of backing up what she says. She's been teaching in AWCCA since 1999 and in the past worked at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. She's also the chief coordinator of the Women Transitioning to Trades & Employment (WTTE) program at George Brown College, now in its third group of students.

The WTTE project was born from a desire to help women in precarious social positions escape the social factors that kept them there. "When someone goes through something like [domestic violence or poverty], often when they leave the situation, they become poorer," she says. "And the area of trades and other non-traditional jobs for women tend to be good, well-paying jobs, but there's an underrepresentation of women in those jobs."

The program was envisioned as a practical way of working with women who were marginalized in various ways—dealing with poverty, interruptions in schooling, and the devastating impacts of violence—and helping those same women with further training and employment prospects to help them get out of those situations. Students—recruited from shelters, employment centers and programs across the GTA—are enrolled in an intensive two year program at George Brown, buoyed by extended social support and counseling opportunities.

"Women bring really wonderful strengths to the trades," Willats says. "We're more detail oriented and we're really excellent project managers, because we're used to multitasking and managing a household. This was an ideal way to help women who want to be independent."

Funding comes from the provincial government's Ontario Women's Directorate. Each cohort takes approximately two years to get through the program, and its particulars have evolved alongside the participants. The first incarnation, which ran from 2007-2009, had about 30 women in total—22 completed the program. The students were thrown headfirst into their training: a full course load with classes in basic refrigeration, math and gas technician III.

To ease the transition, students were surrounded by a high-support system designed by Willats and her peers to help them reach the finish line: tuition
“[One lesson that stands out] is how little it takes to really knock someone off course.”

-Anna Willats, Coordinator, Women Transitioning to Trade & Employment

For more information, find the Assaulted Women’s and Children’s Counsellor/Advocate Program at George Brown College at georgebrown.ca

and transportation were covered, and partnerships with employers & service providers ensured the women would receive quality referrals for everything from housing and employment to mental health services. There was extensive communication between the AWCCA staff and the trades teachers, encouraging flexibility and outreach, as many of the students had primary responsibilities at home that may have habitually kept them from class.

Now in its third cohort, the program looks very different from where it began: it’s grown to 50 students and offers many more training options. Armed with resources and research done by the Spiral Resource Group (led by researcher/educators Jenny Horsman and Heather Lash, also a George Brown instructor in the Academic Upgrading program), as well as research by AWCCA program faculty and a team led by Dean Georgia Quartaro, the program has become an advocate for practical and emotional teaching methods that could be useful in any classroom, not just those populated by survivors of domestic violence.

But Willats and her colleagues don’t want to call these women victims—if anything, the program is designed to show their students that they are anything but.

“It’s not just about helping ‘these poor women’. Yes, our student face challenges. But these are challenges that many students face,” says Willats. “It’s when you compound these problems with the inability to find affordable childcare, adequate healthcare, housing, mental health support, services to ease cultural impacts or no access to loans or funding,” that you have a systemic social problem with no clear exit route.

Willats and her colleagues are encouraged by the response from the industry to date. Partnerships with employers like Direct Energy and support systems like Toronto Employment and Social Services (Ontario Works) have increased outreach, while support from within George Brown (particularly the Centre for Advanced Building Trades) has continued to make their work possible. Willats continues to get calls two or three times a week from would-be participants, hoping they are slots left to fill.

WTTE has evolved past its humble beginnings to be more inclusive: the recruitment timeframe has increased and the options available for students have widened to include more academic upgrading, like math, communication and English preparation, as well as a greater variety of trades. After learning about their options, many women decide that they’d rather enter accounting, hospitality or computer technology or other careers. Some students even elect to go into social work, hoping to break the cycle of poverty and violence for others as they have for themselves.

“[One lesson that stands out] is how little it takes to really knock someone off course,” Willats concludes. “If you have financial supports—a helpful family or savings, for example—then an illness or addiction or incident of violence will throw you, but you’ve got a safety net. When the women we work with experience those same factors, they’re not caught by anything. Because of the support of the Ontario Women’s Directorate, our project can make sure the safety net is in place and they can realize their goals.”