

ENERGY

Climbing Utility Poles Past the Glass Ceiling

by Kyle Massey

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Sara Russell-Lingo, Entergy Arkansas' first female line worker, started work in the field as an apprentice last May. *(Photo provided)*

Sara Russell-Lingo is the first woman to claim a certain title at Entergy Arkansas, and that in itself made the title outdated.

She is the company's first female "lineman," and fine with that. "I don't pay it much mind," said Russell-Lingo, 25, whose red hair flowing from her hardhat easily distinguishes her from the other 550 or so Entergy Arkansas linemen. She's the only woman, a pioneer for the state's largest electric utility.

"From a communications perspective, we've been kind of shifting toward getting ourselves to use the word line 'worker' rather than line 'man' for a couple of years now," said David Lewis, a senior communications specialist at the investor-owned power company. "Sara just accelerated that process considerably." "Lineperson" has been another option.

Title aside, Russell-Lingo started field work for Entergy in May and has climbed her way above the glass ceiling.

But what makes a young woman yearn to climb a utility pole or work with lethal high-voltage electricity? “I wanted a career, and there had been something on [KATV-TV, Channel 7,] about the training program,” Russell-Lingo said.

That was the H-VOLT Academy, a lineworker school at the University of Arkansas’ Pulaski Technical College. “It looked like a way to get a good-paying job outdoors and a real career,” Russell-Lingo said.

Electricity Runs in Family

Electricity, too, was in her blood. Russell-Lingo’s grandfather, Carroll Russell, a Jacksonville electrician, saw the TV news story about the lineman training program and urged her to apply.

In short order, Russell-Lingo was working at Lowe’s, attending H-VOLT and making inroads with Entergy, which is a primary supporter of the academy.

The company liked her scores and leadership skills, and after a couple of attempts at Entergy’s written test, Russell-Lingo passed and was assigned to Line Supervisor Bert Wilson in Little Rock.

An eight-week Entergy boot camp for linemen followed in Jackson, Mississippi, where the daily diet was pole-climbing, repair exercises and constant repetition of safety practices. If she completes her four-year lineman apprenticeship, Russell-Lingo will be a journeyman.

While Russell-Lingo wants to be treated equally, customers do notice she’s no regular lineman. “I pulled up to this house one time and got out of the truck and put my hard hat on and everything. This girl looks at her mom and says, ‘Mom, it’s Superwoman!’”

The physical demands of the job are tough but not overwhelming if you work smart and leverage your tools and techniques, Russell-Lingo said. Fate made her not particularly mechanically inclined, but she has always been scrupulous about fitness.

“I love the outdoors, and I do a lot of running, biking and hiking,” she said. “As a woman, if you want to work this kind of job you have to maintain your physical fitness.”

She also had no undue fear of heights. “Never really bothered me,” she said.

But in some ways, the job “can still be very challenging,” Russell-Lingo said. “As the only woman, some of the guys treat me like I’m one of them. Some treat me like I’m not the same, you know, like a sibling. Some feel like I don’t belong. But like I always say, nothing good in life comes easy. As a pioneer, I’m here to prove myself.”

Beyond the pay, health benefits and promise of a pension, the job also appealed to a woman weary of spending daylong shifts staring at the four walls of a warehouse.

“There are so many things to love about it, starting with the fact that you’re moving around, outdoors, and there’s something new every day. Compared to those four walls you see in retailing and warehousing, you get an adventure.”



Sara Russell-Lingo is in a four-year apprenticeship, and if successful, will become a journeyman lineman for the state’s largest electric utility. *(Photo provided)*

A Better Life

Russell-Lingo also said she’s not built for office work. “When you work to keep the power on, you’re actually making a difference, keeping people alive. They rely on you. And that’s not even talking about the better pay and life you can live.”

Raised in the Jacksonville area, Russell-Lingo now lives in Furlow, between Jacksonville and Lonoke.

After mentioning she’s married, Russell-Lingo got a laugh with her imprecise answer on how long: “Probably for about two years.”

She and husband Dale Fairchild have no children yet.

At first Fairchild was “iffy” on her plan to join Entergy, Russell-Lingo said, but since he’s come around 360. “Now he wants to join me.”

Asked why Entergy took so long to hire a female lineman, Lewis said basically that almost no qualified applicants had applied; the Pulaski Tech program was conceived in part to open a more diverse pipeline.

An equal-opportunity employer, Entergy Arkansas says it urges more women to apply.

“I’m ready for another woman to come and join me,” Russell-Lingo said. “That’s for sure.”