

# INTERNATIONAL Operating Engineer



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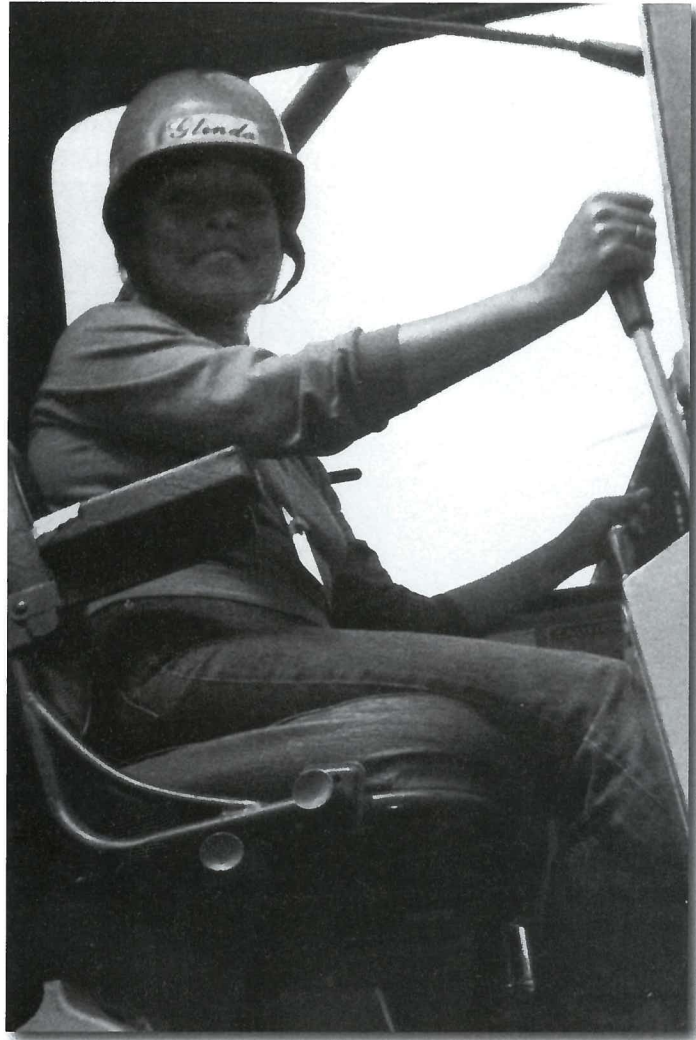
## Veteran Hands

Local union program helps those who served succeed on the homefront



## Jobsite Pioneer Speaks Out for Worker Health

Local 470 member tells how she went from operating cranes to saving lives



AT ONE TIME she was in beauty school. A handful of years later, she could operate every single crane at the Department Of Energy's Savannah River Site. And then, years after that, she started helping her former coworkers receive medical screenings for health problems they may have developed from hazards they were exposed to on the site.

Talking to Glenda Jernigan is like hearing firsthand the history of labor in the late 20th century, both its successes and shortcomings. When she started at the Savannah River Site in 1983, her employers, MK Ferguson and later Bechtel, had never employed a woman as a crane operator. But operating cranes is exactly what Glenda had been trained to do from

previous work with the IUOE. After passing a rigorous safety test, she became the first female crane operator employed by either of those contractors on the site.

At a site like Savannah River, being able to operate a crane meant that Glenda was needed all over. She was an A-Class crane operator and could operate any crane on-site, including the Manitowoc-4100 which had a 250 foot boom and a 30 foot jib. She performed dual-lifts with other operators, and even used cameras to remotely operate cranes in waste transfer stations that were so radioactive that nobody was allowed inside. "I did some of everything," she remembers. "I worked with every craft out there- the painters, the electricians, the boilermakers, the pipefitters, the ironworkers, the laborers. Everybody."

"And I had to dress out, go into radioactive areas. 221-H was the worst," she pauses. "A lot of contamination in that area."

Of course, Glenda wasn't the only worker who was exposed to radiation and other hazards while working construction at a DOE site. Thousands of workers, at Savannah River and at DOE sites across the country, have come face to face with materials and radiation that can have very serious health effects several years after exposure. "Trucks carrying radioactive waste would come out of the H-area Tank Farm, they'd leak and then safety crews would have to tear out the pavement. They'd tear up everything. And they'd even have to take the tires and wheels and different things off of peoples' cars if they drove on contaminated ground," she says. "I mean, you can see it going on around you and you know it's not good."

Now, we know all too well what kinds of exposures Glenda and her coworkers could have encountered. Benzene. Radiation. Asbestos. Lead. The list goes on.

Even today, Glenda is still piecing together how her body may be reacting to all the hazards she worked around. "It's hard to put your finger on it to say this caused this, this caused that," she sighs. "But I'm sure that some of the things I was exposed to have affected my lungs. My doctor told me I have asthma, and I never had asthma growing up as a child. This has only been in the last few years... and I have to take medication for it every day."

All this led Glenda to the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program (BTMed). BTMed, coordinated through CPWR - The Center for Construction Research and Training, offers free work history interviews and medical screenings to former construction workers at DOE sites. For several years, Glenda and her husband Charles (IBEW 1579) worked together as a team out of BTMed's Savannah River outreach office, helping to inform workers about the benefits of BTMed. If BTMed can catch a serious illness early enough, it may prevent an early death.

"We both talked about it, and we decided that it was a very good program, and we liked the idea of helping the workers at SRS and the other DOE sites because we knew what they were going through," Glenda recalls. "Most people thought that there's nothing out there to hurt workers, these workers are getting sick and things are happening to them for other reasons, it's not what they're getting exposed to on the job. And Charles and I both knew that that wasn't true."

In ten years working for BTMed Glenda has interviewed hundreds of former SRS workers and heard their stories. "This one guy that I interviewed in our office...told me he actually put on diving gear and went down in a nuclear reactor pool because they had a leak in there, a crack in the reactor. And they were going to try to patch the crack. Now can you imagine that? And somebody letting him go do that?"

He ended up with thyroid cancer, I don't know if he's still alive or not."

Glenda has since retired from her position with BTMed, but her husband still works there, signing up as many former DOE construction workers as he can to get their health checked out. Workers are eligible for free checkups every three years, in order to catch an illness that might not show symptoms on the first exam. If you or someone you know worked construction at Savannah River or another DOE site across the country, visit [www.btmed.org](http://www.btmed.org) or call 1-800-866-9663 for more information. "[Those are] very dangerous place[s] to work," Glenda warns. "And if you don't know what you're getting yourself into, you better be careful."

[left] Glenda Jernigan, one of the first female crane operators at the Savannah River DOE Site, sitting at the controls of her crane.

[below] Map detailing DOE sites where former workers are eligible for free medical screenings through the BTMed program.

[article] Building Trades National Medical Screening Program

