

A Show of Hands

By [Lauren Foster](#) on June 29 2016 [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [in](#) [✉](#)



Photos by Rachel Coward

Many Eastsiders' primary work tool is a computer. But numerous people still make a living with their hands. On the following pages, we highlight eight passion-fueled individuals who chose to forgo the cubicle life for a more physical one.

Kate S. Mensah

FASHION DESIGNER

Most people shop at the mall or buy clothes online. But for Kate S. Mensah, clothing is much more than something to wear: it's an art form. Mensah sells her eponymous line at local boutiques. She also constructs custom garments. "When I'm sewing, I want to be by myself ... no phone or music," she said. "It's an intimate moment when you design; you want to enjoy it." Each of her pieces is thoughtfully sketched, constructed, and sewn by her, typically in her Redmond home. She often tells clients their garments have a story behind them. And it's always true.



Kate S. Mensah

Daniel Sullivan

BEEKEEPER

Shipwreck Honey

Daniel Sullivan speaks in a whisper when he gets close to his bees. He knows that loud noises can cause his "girls" to get rowdy. To monitor them, he delicately opens each hive — often with gloved hands — and smells for pheromones they may release. "The alarm pheromone in this case smells like bananas. So, when you have bananas coming up out of the hive, you know you're in deep water. They're about to light you up," he said. Sullivan would know; he once was stung 38 times in a day. The owner of Shipwreck Honey has apiaries across the area, and the one at Salish Lodge produces the honey served at the in-house restaurant. As hard as Sullivan works to keep his bees healthy, he says it's impossible to make a living solely as a beekeeper. He makes ends meet with other odd jobs, like supplying firewood and bat boxes.

"(Beekeeping) is as delicate as you want it to be. ... I'm nourished by these bees. My soul is nourished by these honeybees."



Daniel Sullivan

Michaele Blakely

FARMER

Growing Things Farm

Michaele Blakely has been a farmer for over 25 years. She harvests veggies, eggs, and meats on her farm in Carnation. She previously had stints as a waitress and a tailor, but those vocations weren't for her. "It's not that I disliked the work or I disliked the people," she said. "It's just — it's very important for me to make my own decisions about what I'm doing with my life." Blakely says it's not hard to make a living as a farmer if you have the right resources. And for her, farming is a way of life. "It's hard for me to comprehend now how many people do not have a connection anymore to the soil or to growing, because it used to be just innate," she said.



Michaele Blakely

Matt Kelley
PASTRY CHEF
Barking Frog

At one point, Matt Kelley was a milkman; during another period, he raced stock cars. But when it was time to get serious about a long-term career, all the aptitude tests Kelley took pointed him toward becoming a chef. Now he's known for putting an artistic twist on traditional desserts at the Barking Frog restaurant in Woodinville. Some days, he's so focused in the kitchen that he has no idea if it's sunny or raining. For him, the hard work adds to the taste of his creations. "The factory machines just pumping out Twinkies as opposed to making an angel food cake with whipped cream — I'm sure you can tell the difference," he said. "(Handmade food has) a little touch of love."



Matt Kelley

Randie Sidlinger
VIOLINIST

Lake Washington Symphony Orchestra

Take one look at Randie Sidlinger's living room wall, adorned with photos of relatives with instruments in hand, and it's clear her upbringing was a musical one. She has been playing the violin since she was about 10 years old, and was playing the piano at an even younger age. Today, Sidlinger makes a living cobbling together different musical gigs. She's a member of the first violin section of the Lake Washington Symphony Orchestra, and she teaches violin lessons. Her music career follows her everywhere, evident in her string-calloused fingers and the music that plays in her dreams.

"I don't see that musicians will ever be completely replaced by electronics. There's a warmth about real instruments playing that I think is very exciting."



Randie Sidlinger

Elie Egan

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

GLY Construction

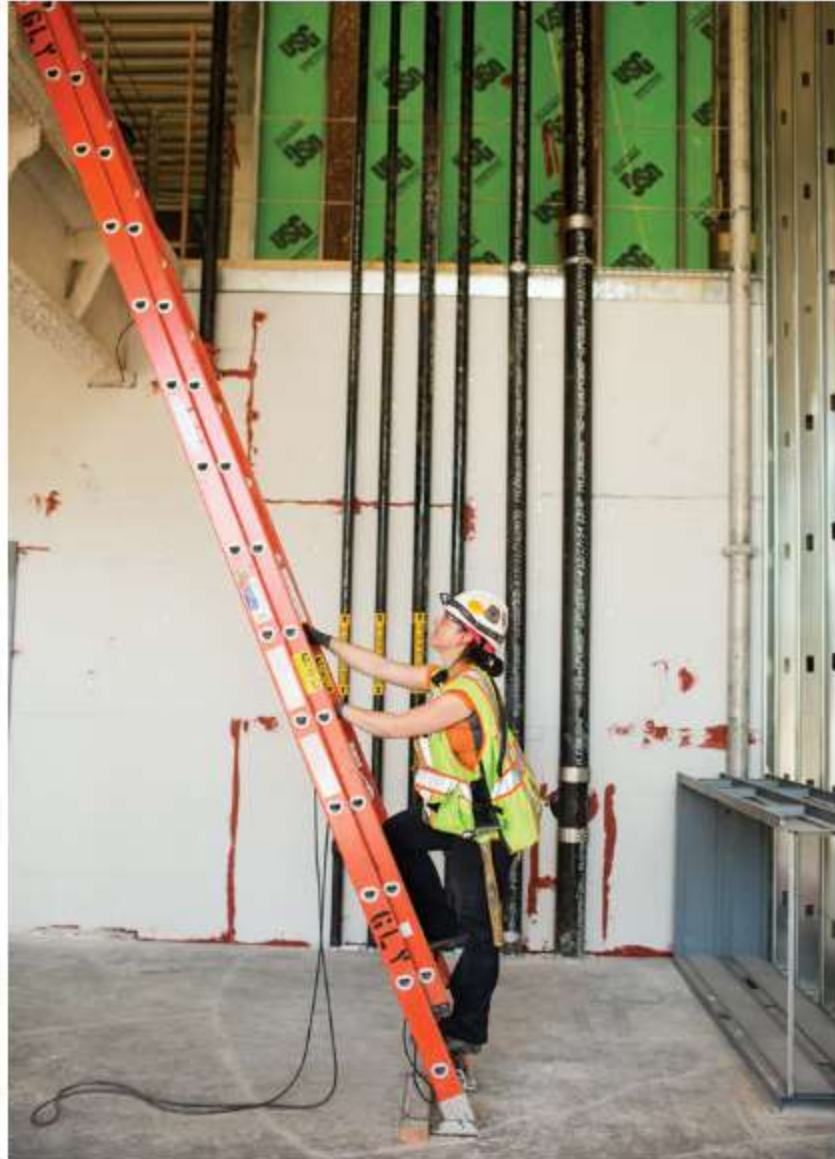
At work, Elie Egan has one of the best views in Bellevue.

When the GLY Construction worker's day starts at 4 or 5 a.m., she often catches the orange and pink sunrise over Mount Rainier. She's helping build the Lincoln Square expansion, and climbs to added floors as the building grows. Egan is a trained carpenter, but for this project she's working on the building's layout, monitoring any difference between construction progress and the original blueprints. She walks with a tool belt strapped to her waist; a hammer and tape measure are essential to the job.

Egan took an untraditional route to her career in construction. Before starting at GLY about three years ago, she was a biochemist conducting research for Seattle Children's Hospital. During days spent studying DNA sequences on a computer screen, Egan longed to be away from her desk, working with her hands. A friend suggested carpentry, and Egan was sold.

Egan loves the gratification that comes with building something. When she drives to work from Seattle, she can see her project slowly rising into the sky. Beyond that, the money's pretty good.

"My first day as an apprentice, I was making the equivalent of what my friends with master's (degrees) were making at Seattle Children's," she said.



Elie Egan

On cold days, when Egan's high in the sky, her hands feel like blocks of ice, and those hands must handle a variety of demanding tasks, such as operating a jack hammer. She has social pressures, too. Egan is one of the few women on site — 9 percent of construction workers nationwide are women — and feels her job performance has implications beyond her own reputation.

"Anything that I get wrong, it's not just going to be, 'Elie screwed up.' It's going to be, 'Oh, women in construction screw up,'" Egan said. "So in a way it feels like any minority really would be representing more than just themselves. So there is that pressure. That I have to get it right."

Egan says she's felt nothing but welcomed and supported by her male colleagues. But as a 5-foot-tall woman in construction, she also knows she's a novelty. Once, a group of tourists asked to take a photo of her suited up in construction gear. Others just take her photo without asking.

"I don't necessarily like being a roadside attraction, but hey, if it gets more people to do what I'm doing, if it makes it more visible that there are women doing construction ... bring it on. Take my picture. I'm doing this — tell your daughter she can be doing it, too."



Humaira Abid

Humaira Abid
ARTIST

Humaira Abid was a top art student in her homeland of Pakistan. She decided to major in wood sculpture because few women were doing it. "Wood is generally a male-dominated medium in the world, and there's no woman's voice in it," she said. Abid uses her art to start conversations about women's experiences — miscarriages, menstruation — that can be considered taboo to talk about. Her art has been featured in many galleries and museum exhibits across around the world. The full-time artist works out of her house in Renton and her studio in Pakistan. Abid's native region plays a major role in her art. The hand-chiseled wood shoes she holds in this photo are a replica of her 4-year-old daughter's red Mary Janes. The shoes are part of a collection of pieces inspired by a shooting at a school in Peshawar, Pakistan, that left 132 children dead. "After that incident," Abid said, "I couldn't stop thinking, 'What if that was my daughter?'"

"(My studio) is the happiest place in my house. Even if I work, like, 18 hours a day, I don't get tired. I just love it so much."

David Ekstrom
TATTOO ARTIST

Deep Roots Tattoo & Piercing

David Ekstrom has been drawing since he was a kid, and now he charges \$150 an hour to tattoo his work onto clients in Bellevue. His job goes deeper than just the art, as clients sometimes share intimate life details with Ekstrom. "There's a reason why torturing is a thing. People open up when they're in pain," he said. He has the letters S-T-R-E-N-G-T-H tattooed on his fingers as a reminder of his own tenacity. He hopes more people will recognize tattooing as art rather than a medium for spreading violent messages; thus,



David Ekstrom

Ekstrom won't tattoo anything related to gangs or hatred. That's not what his art is for.