



# His Story, Our Stories: Encountering God through Our Work

In Matthew 22:37, Jesus instructs his followers to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This invitation challenges anyone who desires to follow Christ to live for him in every area of life--in our moral choices and family relationships, but also in our daily work.

***But what does it look like to bring our whole heart, soul, and mind to our work? How can our work express our love for God?***

Recently, *Christianity Today* ran a series of articles authored by Chris Horst and Denver Institute for Faith & Work CEO Jeff Haanen exploring these very questions. In a series of interviews with a business leader, investment banker, factory owner, hotel housekeeper, entrepreneur, and educator, Horst and Haanen observe how this diverse group of professionals integrates faith into their work.

This study is intended to be used by small groups. Group leaders can send the article to participants before the week before the gathering and use the story as fodder for group discussion in person. Discussion guides are included to facilitate conversation about God’s intent for our work in the world.

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As you learn from these faithful followers of Christ, we pray you will be challenged and equipped to approach your daily work in new ways. May God empower you to love him with your whole heart, soul, and mind through your work!

# *LIGHT for ELECTRICIANS*

by Jeff Haanen

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“Come, let me show you around.”

As we rise from the conference table, Karla Nugent—cofounder of Weifield Group Contracting, a commercial electrical company in Denver—leads me into the pre-fabrication shop. Coils, wires, and electrical boxes are being assembled for installation. The only woman in the room of more than a dozen men, Nugent introduces me to employee Justin Hales.

“Electrical work is art,” Hales, an electrician’s apprentice, tells me. “Two years ago, they put me on the platform at Union Station. I would lay out the floors, locate everything, like a switch or outlet on the wall.”

“When you turn your pipes, make them uniform—that’s art.” He pauses. “It probably goes unnoticed to the average person, but we see it. We take pride in our work.”

Nugent co-founded Weifield in 2002 alongside three business partners. Since then, the company has grown to 250 employees and has emerged at the forefront of electrical construction. For example, Weifield was behind the Net Zero, a LEED-Plat-

inum research facility at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colorado. It’s one of the most energy-efficient buildings in the world, operating solely on power generated at the building site.

Denver’s business community took notice of Nugent because of her philanthropy. As leader of sales, marketing, and human resources, she’s created a culture of generosity at Weifield. The company donates to more than 30 nonprofits in the city, including organizations that support women, veterans, at-risk youth, and the urban poor. Employees join in the generosity as well, taking bike rides to raise money for MS and building houses for Habitat for Humanity on company time.

In 2014, Nugent won the Denver Business Journal’s Corporate Citizen of the Year Award as well as the award for Out-



standing Woman in Business for architects, engineers, and construction.

But light began to flood into Weifield when, several years ago, Nugent decided to bring the community’s needs into the company. After seeing growing income inequality in Denver, she created the Weifield Group apprenticeship program.

## BECOMING AN APPRENTICE

Scott Ammon, a journeyman electrician at Weifield Group, joined the Army after high school. After serving in Desert Storm and four years in the Middle East, he worked for 11 years in the US Postal Service. “I’d actually been suffering from PTSD while I was there,” Ammon tells me. As a result, he “jumped into a pretty bad coke and meth addiction.” To get treatment, Ammon spent two years at the Stout Street Foundation, an alcohol and drug rehabilitation facility.

During rehab, Ammon heard about an opening for an electrical apprentice at Weifield. The four-year program trains employees in a pre-fabrication process (preparing electrical materials for on-site installation) while paying for their education to become state-certified journeymen electricians.

“I was really nervous when [Nugent] interviewed me because I was in treatment at the time,” Ammon says, figuring he’d be passed over because of his struggle with substance abuse. “But she looked me straight in the eyes and just nodded her head.”

When he got the offer, despite his rocky past, “That made me feel so good,” he says. “I said to myself, ‘From now on, they’ve got my full dedication.’”

In Colorado, 49 percent of all jobs are known as “middle-skill jobs”—one of 11 sectors requiring a GED but not a four-year college degree. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that in 20 years, 47 percent of all US jobs will still be middle-skilled, since building, plumbing, and wiring cities cannot be outsourced. But Colorado has struggled to find enough skilled tradesmen to keep up with the meteoric pace of Denver’s population growth.

So in addition to leading statewide

workforce initiatives like Build Colorado and Skills to Compete, Nugent began reaching out to their charity partners—Denver Rescue Mission, Peer One, Stout Street Foundation—to find more electricians.

When they started the apprenticeship, they had low expectations. “If we get a 25 percent stick [employee retention] rate, we’ll be happy,” Nugent recalls thinking upon launching the program. “Now we’re in our fifth year. I just ran the statistics the other day. We’re at an 85 percent stick rate. They’re ready to work. They’re excited.”

The three keys to success, says apprentice program manager Brad Boswell, are attendance, attitude, and the ability to learn mechanical skills. “If they can do those things, I can make them into an electrician.” Some apprentices who have become journeymen have—in four years—gone from homelessness or addiction to making upwards of \$50,000 per year.

After one of the many Weifield fundraisers for a community partner, a teary-eyed mother approached Nugent. “You gave my son a chance,” she said. “He was on his last leg. Nobody believed in him. But you did.”

## A CONDUIT OF HOPE

“I pray that people see the good we’re trying to accomplish here through the workplace,” Nugent says.

Nugent’s Christian faith began in fourth grade, when she would hop on a Sunday school bus every week to attend church. Though nurtured by church and youth ministries, it was her mother, Rosemarie Craig, an executive at United Airlines and single mother, who gave Nugent a work ethic and vision for the good that business could do in the lives of others.

Today, she is a pillar of support to many employees who come from broken homes. “People start gravitating to you be-

cause they see you're stable and sound, but they don't realize that it's your faith." She's also become an ethics gauge at her company for everybody from executives facing tough decisions on high-profile projects to apprentices contemplating divorce.

Nugent believes being a woman in a male-majority industry allows her to have conversations that many men couldn't. "I have meetings with developers, executives, and other owners and usually guide it to some sort of eternal piece," she says. "Most guys would just talk projects and numbers. But I can pull off that conversation because I'm a woman. It's my challenge; it's kind of fun." Through these conversations, two of her business partners have become Christians.

"I could live in a little bubble, in my comfortable Christian community," Nugent says, "but here I [reach] a little bit of everybody, people I normally wouldn't share life with. I hear their stories and help them find a home."

"Our buildings are really cool, but at the end of the day, it's about the people. Jesus gave us community to serve each other."

## RHYTHMS OF REST

Nugent's husband, Jack, owns an auto transportation company, is a NASCAR driver, and hunts on the weekends. As they raise their two children and excel in their professions, I expected to find a trace of exhaustion in her voice from the demands of work, life, and family.

Instead, Nugent shared with me a set of simple rhythms of rest, prayer, and dedication to her calling to be a wife, mother, and business leader.

As one of Denver's most networked women, she turns off her phone every Sunday. "It can wait until Monday," Nugent

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says. Her emails are brief, her social media presence is minimal, and she takes vacations with her family over the summers.

And when she considers a less busy life, she simply prays for direction. "Every time I pray about it, I say, 'God, maybe I'm not supposed to be here. Am I supposed to do something else?' But each time, God brings in a new relationship with somebody who's having a tough time. For now, God wants me here."

She is committed to both her husband and two kids as well as her "work family." "I'm on the front end of this ship, closing deals," she says. "And if we don't win deals, we can't provide for all the families here. And so I balance that with, 'I'd like to be home for dinner.'"

"As a woman in this industry, it's easy to be soft. I'm not the construction guy's guy. But I can be totally different because I'm a woman."

"She really cares about us," says Justin Hales.

And as Nugent quietly transforms the trades in Denver, the work of her hands is giving light to a new generation of electricians.

## PAUSE AND REFLECT

What stood out to you as you read this article?

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How does Karla's work reflect the gospel? How does she sacrificially serve others?

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In what ways do the people featured in this article find satisfaction in their work? Where do you find satisfaction in your daily work?

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