



## Calgary 2019 Kiara Reissner

### What do you do?



This is a common question that comes up at social gatherings. If I were to ask you, what would you say and how does it feel to say that. On the surface, “what do you do?” is a harmless question, it's just another conversation starter, but on another level, you feel like there's some sort of judgment involved, how important you are, how successful you are, how useful you are, based simply on what you do for a living.

Four years ago, I dreaded being asked questions. I was at my second year of university doing a bachelor's degree in English and History with the goal of becoming a teacher. But something wasn't right. I would wake up each morning and I wouldn't look forward to the day. I didn't feel like I was making the best use of myself. I was heading farther and farther down a path which I wasn't sure about. I felt trapped. I thought this was where I wanted to be but it didn't feel like I had imagined. I felt incredibly misplaced. I would ask myself questions like “why don't I feel fulfilled? Why don't I feel the passion and drive others do? Why did I feel such a lack of engagement?” I didn't know what I wanted to do but, in that moment, I knew it was no longer this.

Unwilling to put any more time or energy into something I knew wasn't for me, I left school. I was going to take some time off to think about what I really wanted to do with my life. And when someone asked me “what do you do?”, I had to say I was taking a break to figure things out. It was in that moment that I felt like a complete and utter failure.

During this time, I started working at my uncle's auto body shop again. I had previously worked there while I was in high school as an afterschool job. I would help out in the office doing clerical work and talking to customers. But this time I needed a full-time position. They had an opening for shop clean up and detail so I took it. When I worked in the office, I had seen the cars come in and the cars go out. All the stuff in the middle was a mystery to me, kind of like magic. Despite a large number of my family members being involved in the automotive industry and growing up in or around shops since I was young, I knew nothing about cars. It was hard coming into a workplace where I felt uneducated or clueless. I wasn't used to that. What seemed so simple for them was so hard for me to understand. This was something completely new for me. But I was up for the challenge.

During this time, I was really thinking about what I was going to do with my future. Would I have a career or just a job? You spend almost as much time at work as you do at home so you better enjoy it. I wanted to be successful and fulfilled but I didn't know how to get there. I knew I wanted to make good money, but that was the outcome of a career. So instead I started thinking about the impact of a career. How would the career I choose affect my day to day life. Do I have a passion for what I do? Will I have work-life balance? Are there opportunities for growth? Was it reasonable time and price to complete? Would there be job opportunities? Could I get a job after school?

I had been working in the shop for about a year when I first felt a spark of passion for automotive refinishing. My inspiration to pursue refinishing came when I got an opportunity to work with one of the



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painters one on one. He was doing a complete paint job on a motorcycle and he needed some extra help, so he asked me to come into the shop on a weekend. Up until this point I had gotten very few opportunities to work on vehicles. This was one of the first times that I was able to be apart of the process from start to finish. And it turned out to be something that I couldn't have imagined. The process of reshaping panels, mixing color, or painting all the parts and having them come out perfect. You got immediate satisfaction and reward from your work when it came out of the booth at the end of a bake cycle. We had made something that was so beat up beautiful again. And it left a lasting impact on me.

Working one on one with a painter also allowed time for me to ask questions. This is the first time I can remember having a mentor at a job. He told me what school was like. What a career in the trade could be. The more I watched and the more questions I asked, the more excited I got. Could this be it? Could automotive refinishing be for me?

I had never considered a career in the trades before. So I had to think. Does this fit all my criteria for a career path? Could I have work life balance? Most of the guys I worked with only worked 9-5 during weekdays and all had families.

Was school a reasonable time and price to complete? In total it would be two programs totalling three years. The first program is the automotive refinishing prep tech apprentice program. I would need 120 hours of technical training, and 1680 work-based hours. After I had completed that the next step would be to register as an automotive refinishing apprentice, I would need 120 hrs minimum of technical training and 3360 work-based hours; which would take me roughly two years to complete. After I had completed that I would be a red seal certified painter. In total I had estimated that it would cost roughly 4000 dollars to complete. That is how much I spent on one semester at a traditional university, so this seemed amazing to me. In addition, the ITA offers grants while you are an apprentice and upon completion. You can get 2000 dollars back upon completion of a trade.

Would I be able to find a job? I would be getting experience while I was going to school and working. I would finish with the skills and knowledge I needed in order to get a job.

Is it a good living and compensation? Automotive refinishers can make between 23-30 dollars an hour. The industry's use of a flat rate pay system also meant that the faster and more efficiently you could work the more you earn.

Would there be growth opportunities? Becoming a refinisher would offers the opportunity of working in a changing and progressing trade. There are always new things to learn and ways to improve your skills. If you work at an ICBC accredited shop, you are eligible to take up to 8 hours of courses a year. These might include new techniques or products.

There would also be opportunities for change and progress in the future. My co-workers would often discuss when it came time for them to retire from painting, they could manage a shop or become an estimator. It's also a job you can do anywhere, and many people have their own small businesses. The more research I did the better automotive refinishing looked to me.

Now I had to think was I suited for a career in the automotive industry. What skills and traits could I bring to refinishing. I was good with my hands and had an eye for detail. And the painters at the shop would



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remark to me about how women see color better. I got along well with everyone and was able to work with them to complete projects. I had experience dealing with customers from my time working in the office.

My interest in vehicles was growing. People are often surprised when I say I didn't get into automotive painting just for cars. For me it was art. Being able to make something look as it had, or better. Getting to be creative everyday. And so I decided that I would become an automotive painter.

In the year I had worked at the shop I had listened carefully and my knowledge had grown. But in asking to become a refinishing prep apprentice I was denied. A little deflated but not deterred; I took whatever jobs they would give me. I wanted to prove myself. Not just to my employer but to myself. A year later I was granted my apprenticeship. Even when I officially started my apprenticeship I was still detailing and doing cleanup. But I didn't care, I was on my way. Things continued this way for another year and I started to realize that the things I was learning, I had to learn on my own. The painter I considered my mentor had left, and there was no one to ask questions anymore.

When the only other prep technician left the shop, I saw this as an opportunity, and I asked my manager to become a full-time prep tech, hoping they would move me up and hire someone else to do cleanup and detail. But I was told they didn't want to have to train someone to do my job. What did I do? I cleaned cars and emptied garbage cans. That is not what I wanted to tell people, that's not what I wanted to tell myself. I wanted to be an automotive painter. So, I decided I was ready to let go of that job. I made the decision to leave my small northern BC town to move to Vancouver. I wasn't learning what I needed to succeed at my job so I signed up for the foundational refinishing prep tech course at Vancouver Community College. And this time when I was at school, it was different. It was an amazing experience. Attending school and feeling that engagement with learning again made me sure that I had made the right choice to leave university 3 years earlier, and to leave my family's shop that year. That drive to succeed that I thought I had been missing, I had it. I achieved my technical certification. And applied for recommendation for certification. After finishing school, I decided to stay in the city. I am now employed at Richmond Auto Body where I am an automotive refinishing apprentice. I work on the surfaces of motor vehicles. Mostly restoring finishes after bodywork repairs have been done. Some of my duties include matching and mixing color, preparing metal surfaces for painting, by spot filling, sanding, masking, applying primer, color coats, clear coat and cleaning and polishing painted surfaces.

The apprenticeship program allowed me to learn on the job. Getting to experience situations first hand instead of just in a classroom. I never knew how invaluable this kind of learning could be, but now I can't imagine it any other way. I am fortunate that my journeyman painter is a great mentor who I can learn from. And I hope that I can pass on my knowledge to an apprentice one day.

Now I look forward to everyday in my career. Each day brings something new and challenging for me. I have just over a year left of my apprenticeship left but I know there will always be new things to learn. Once I finish my red seal, I would like to move into customs work and explore the more artistic side of refinishing.

*What do you do?*

This is no longer a question I dread. It's something that I can be proud to say that I do.

*I am an automotive refinishing apprentice.*