When 18-year-old Neolani Narayan first tells her friends about her occupation, she usually gets a confused look, followed by the question: “You’re a girl doing that?” Working as a pest controller, she wants everyone to know that, contrary to popular belief, not all girls need a man to fight their bug battles for them. In fact, battling spiders, fleas, rats and bed bugs is a daily task for Neolani. Why she does it, she says, is because “It’s an awesome hands-on job where you get to help people and put their minds at ease.”

With her father in the trade, Neolani has been working in the family business as an exterminator for only a couple of months but has been involved with it for as long as she can remember. Born in Fiji and raised in Samoa, she has childhood memories of riding around in her father’s van having a blast meeting new people, which she says is her favourite part of the job.

Moving to Wellington as a teenager, Neolani finished high school at the end of last year. Since then, she has been in full-time training, learning how to deal with often toxic pesticides, which she says is “easy to pick up as long as you have common sense.” Her two younger sisters will also get the opportunity to join the family business once they finish school.

In the male-dominated industry of pest control, Neolani says to come across another female is far more rare than finding your house has a pest problem. “There’s not many of us,” she says, “I only know of three others in Wellington.” The reason, she suggests, is the image of the profession.

Neolani says she often gets calls from distressed Wellingtonians who say they have bites all over their body. The most frequent culprits in Wellington, says Neolani, have been bedbugs and fleas this summer. While rodents can usually be dealt with using traps, cockroaches, ants and fleas need a gel or a sprayable bait.

When one customer kept contacting Neolani saying the treatment wasn’t working, it turns out bugs were not to blame for the woman’s troubles but a rare skin condition. “I’m glad the poor woman has now managed to get that under control and can finally get a good night’s sleep” says Neolani.

When Neolani’s not saving Wellingtonians from less-than-friendly home visitors, she can be found playing pool at Murphy’s Bar or in her friend’s kitchen, eating and playing Rummy.

For now Neolani is happy to be working with her Dad, but hopes to one day work in the food industry. Her childhood spent in the islands, she says, gave her a particular love of cooking seafood.

While Neolani has no fear of any of the bugs she treats, she says birds are an entirely different story. “What people don’t realise is that pigeons and birds can be considered pests,” she says, “Now, I’m petrified of them.”