

# F O C U S

This  
Month

## Women in Construction



### Endless possibilities for women in construction

**Evelyn Tavernier, President  
Express Commercial Cleaning**  
Austin, TX

#### What is your background in the construction industry?

My stepfather was a painter and when I was young, my mother worked in post-construction cleaning. Since then, I've always had a fascination with the construction process and what it took from a project management standpoint to complete a construction project.

#### Why did you choose a career in the construction industry?

When I started Express Commercial Cleaning, I knew that post-construction cleaning would be an area that we would target. I felt that there was a niche for this underserved trade in the construction industry.

#### Have you had a mentor?

I have had mentors at previous jobs I've held but never a mentor in the construction industry. The people that have mentored me gave me valuable guidance that I was able to utilize while we worked together and I've put that same guidance into practice in my own company.

#### What are the benefits of women pursuing a construction career?

The possibilities truly are endless for a woman exploring a challenging and rewarding construction career. With technical colleges now offering construction

project management and certifications in many trades used within the construction process, it will become easier for women to attain the education they need. The local, state and federal government encourages Women Historically Underutilized Businesses (HUB's) to bid on contracts. With a little research you can find many free local resources to help you become certified and help you bid on contracts.

#### What do you enjoy most about your career?

I enjoy seeing the finished product. I love how excited our clients are about opening their new business. It really comes together for them after the final cleaning. They know they are one step closer to opening their doors for business. Often times we are the last subs before they open their doors; it's a neat insight into their business. I'm also thankful for the relationships I have built with

our vendors and customers and where they are going.

#### What specific challenges have you faced in your career?

Growing is not a bad problem to have but it has been the toughest. It's tough to make a decision that has a financial impact on your business. Finding that medium between not being re-active but not being so proactive that you invest in a piece of equipment too soon for example.

#### How did you overcome those challenges?

We've been able to learn from every experience and are now able to time things just right so that we have the resources (i.e. personnel, equipment, or supplies) when we've needed them.

#### In your experience, are more opportunities opening up for women in construction?

Absolutely, I think the perception that construction is only an industry with hard-hats and hammers is changing. There is still a ways to go but as a society we are more accepting of women in what is a male dominated industry.

#### What areas do you see the most increase in jobs for women?

As the construction industry continues to grow, providing services such as project management is an area of many opportunities for women.

#### What advice can you offer women who want to pursue a construction career?

Invest in yourself first. Especially if you plan on starting your own company, you are your company's most valuable asset. Whether this means getting a degree or continuing education to remain informed of issues in your industry, or simply classes on running a business; they are all great investments.

#### Which is more important for a construction career – education, or experience?

To be successful a successful business owner needs both. Education, more importantly a financial background is vital to running your business. Experience is extremely critical because it could mean the success or failure of your ability to provide your services.

#### From a woman's perspective, has the construction industry changed over the years?

It definitely has changed over the years. The construction industry is no longer just a hardhat and hammer industry. It is now an industry that offers build, develop and design services to high tech start-ups offering bidding software.

#### What are your goals for the future in the construction industry?

I'd like to see our company grow in the number of crews we have tackling post-construction cleaning projects. –ab



### This ain't your grandma's construction world!

**Kathleen Kovich Acock, President  
Alpha Building Corporation**  
San Antonio, TX

Those of us my age, (who've seen 29 more than once), occasionally marvel at how far our industry has come. We work in a profession that is as old as the pyramids and older. Yet in the past 50 years we have seen dramatic changes as a completely new management model has emerged – we've become more dependent on brains over pure brawn.

Fifty years ago construction was unquestionably a "man's world" and for many reasons. The work was physically difficult; jobsites were dangerous places because many of today's safety practices were not observed; and it was an entrepreneurial environment, whether carpenter or firm owner – they each pushed for autonomy. And, at the end of the day, it was always dirty, grimy, muddy, hot or cold – not an appealing environment for the women of the time.

But how times have changed. Carpenters, managers and owners are highly educated in their roles. Most with professional craft training, associate degrees in project management, and bachelor or master degrees in construction science. The tools have changed: craft tools are stronger, lighter in weight, and cordless. Hardhats, ear plugs, eye protection, confined space and fall protection procedures are practiced every day.

Our management tools are now

computers, notebooks and mobile phones. Scheduling, management and accounting software are specifically designed for our industry and the multitude of roles within it. Our owner/clients have become team members and, as such, they expect sophisticated scheduling, communication, cost management, and post construction documentation that provides them with a detailed account of all the pieces and parts of their new facilities.

So what would grandma say? First, I think she would be astonished at the number of women of all ages, sizes and backgrounds who are in construction. They're at the jobsites, on the trucks, in the warehouses, and in the offices filling key roles in accounting, marketing, estimating, engineering, project management and leadership. She would then be astonished at how the management and administration of projects have changed. She would also note that men and wom-

en now work side-by-side, whatever the task, as a team. Almost completely gone are the jokes, whistles, catcalls, threats and sabotage that greeted women when they entered this industry in grandma's day.

The women in construction today have chosen this profession. This is not a bridge job that gets them from the wedding cake to diapers and then back. This is a profession for which they are well educated and trained. It provides them intrinsic pleasure in their stamp on the 'built environment'.

In fact not only are women respected for their ability to contribute, they are no longer compelled to try to look and act like men in order to 'go along and get along'. These days women at the jobsites and in construction offices can dress, think and act like women. A testament to the strength of the contribution they are making. Our industry has discovered that we need the differing input of all our team members. Those differences in approach and problem solving have brought new and better solutions to productivity, cost containment and customer response.

Now imagine our industry 20 or 30 years from now. I suspect it will still revolve around a dedicated project team. We know there will be more advanced planning and work processes in place, already BIM is being widely demanded. There is an increased interest in pre-engineered or modular buildings which, pro-

vide time and cost efficiencies. Researchers are making great headway with printers that can model a three-dimensional object. Could custom-built forms, facings or sidings someday be designed on the office computer and then printed out perfectly as a form and ready to be installed? Who knows?

So, where will you lead this industry? Your opportunities are wide open. Fifty years from now, what will you look back on as your achievement to move our craft and industry forward? One thing is certain; when you look back at the construction industry of 2011 you'll once again be amazed at the changes.

*Kathleen Acock is the second-generation owner of Alpha Building Corporation. She began working for the company in 1977 and held a succession of increasingly responsible positions from administrative and business management, to project management, project development, and Vice-President. She took over from her father as Alpha's President in 1992 and assumed ownership in 1993.*

*Ms. Acock is a member of the Construction Industry Advisory Council at Texas A&M University, and a founding member of the CIAC for The University of Texas at San Antonio; a Board Member of the South Texas Chapter of the Associated Builders & Contractors; and has been an invited speaker at the local, state and regional conferences of APPA, The Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers. –dn*