

# CONSTRUCTION<sup>®</sup> BUSINESS OWNER

THE LEADING BUSINESS MAGAZINE FOR CONTRACTORS

## 20 Outstanding Women in Construction

*From CEOs to  
specialty trades,  
the powerhouse  
females  
advancing  
the industry*

HOW TO  
**MINIMIZE  
FINANCIAL  
RISK**  
IN AN UNCERTAIN  
ECONOMIC  
CLIMATE

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8 steps to create  
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**Kabri Lehrman-Schmid**  
Project Superintendent at Hensel  
Phelps Construction Co.



SPECIAL SECTION

# OUTSTANDING WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION

## THIS INDUSTRY IS CHANGING.

For some, that truth is hard to stomach. But others are leaning in, no holds barred. The construction leaders of tomorrow are welcoming tech adoption, alternative methods for project delivery, and other changes with open arms. They're also looking to a labor force that has historically been underrepresented as a way to alleviate the ongoing skills shortage.

Currently, women represent only 9% of the construction workforce. In the field, that statistic has an even starker contrast: For every 100 men on the jobsite, there is only one woman. However, many of the women who go to work in construction every day do so with the drive and a vision for a more diverse and more inclusive workforce.

In the following pages, we've highlighted 20 of those women. CBO's Outstanding Women in Construction drew nearly 200 nominations from industry leaders for women working in the office, in the field and everywhere in between, all over the United States and in myriad sectors of the industry.

Finalists were chosen based on their skills, leadership and management techniques, as well as their exceptional contributions to their companies, industry and communities. The women in this section represent some of the very best in the industry—each and every one is working to build a better environment for all who work in construction, regardless of gender, race or background.

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## Jessica Adame

National Outreach Manager  
McCarthy Building Co.

**Job Must-Have:** *"I'd have to say a safety plan. How are we developing and keeping people safe? How are the foremen taking care of workers? I want everyone taken care of on our jobsites."*

When Jessica Adame left a staffing position in manufacturing to become the acquisition manager for McCarthy Building Co.'s Texas region, she was surprised to learn her new role didn't involve staffing the trades, but, rather, those in salaried positions. "I was told they deal with that on the jobsite," she said. But she made it her mission to change things, and it paid off.

In 2016, McCarthy executives approached Adame, saying, "I know we said we didn't need to pay attention to craft professionals, but we want to now." They then gave her the reins to change how the company recruits, staffs and trains the trades. The progress Adame has helped McCarthy make since then is her biggest accomplishment, she said.

"I've built a better recruiting structure and labor management process. Hiring craft professionals is no longer left to the jobsite, where craftspeople were hired for one job and fired afterward. I was able to change the recruiting and labor management processes," she said. It's an entirely new manpower system, where McCarthy really understands who its people are, where they are and where they're going next. The process has been implemented nationally, not just in Texas.

But Adame's work hasn't stopped at McCarthy's walls. She is also focused on changing the minds of those who don't see the trades as a lucrative or practical career choice and can still be convinced before they're forced to make those decisions—students. Through her program to attract a diverse group of young people to the industry, Adame visits trade schools and middle and high school students, providing hands-on activities and speaking about the careers available in construction. "They see the money you can make in construction instead of owing so much in student loans," she said. "We also have some say they were considering architecture but have decided to go into construction management or technology and work outside with their hands instead."

The most underreached population within this subset of students—girls—especially need the outreach to ever see the trades as an option, Adame says. "When people think of construction, they think of hands-on building, but there is also a lot of problem solving and relationship building involved. Women have the ability to approach problems with great communication and bring a bunch of ideas together," she said. Helping girls realize this will take creating a whole new industry culture, but Adame acknowledges that the industry has come a long way. "There is a lot of initiative and support in the industry now that wasn't there in the first couple of years after I joined," she said.

Her advice to women entering construction: "Don't question yourself. Create freely. Be assertive. Ask questions. Speak your mind. Stop yourself from overthinking. It's not important to have all of the answers, just a few great ideas."



## Rita Brown

President

Brown Construction Collective [BCC+]

**Job Must-Have:** *"Authenticity. The kind that allows even those at the top to recognize they're not always correct—that everyone still has something to learn."*

Rita Brown gained industry experience from the ground up, first by working at her father's company as a teen, and later by co-owning a construction company with her husband. Brown Construction Collective (BCC+) was born on this side of the Great Recession and now stands as a major contractor in the Detroit, Michigan, area. "I've had an exceptionally positive experience as a woman in construction, but I do recognize that many women have different experiences—it would be myopic to think that my experience is universal," Brown said.

It's that perspective that drove the genesis of Project Accelerate, a Detroit-based program that aims to educate women about the multifaceted opportunities in construction. "It's about making things happen for ourselves as women, and not waiting for somebody else to come along and benevolently 'empower' us," Brown said. "The word 'empower' implies women might somehow not be capable of something before being given help to get there." The free program is designed to help women in the construction industry better understand their options and build out their knowledge. It also drives education for those considering working in the trades.

While programs like this are shaping inclusion, we still have some work to do. According to Brown, there are a lot of issues that must be addressed to make the industry a more inclusive environment. "Incremental changes will help us better service our projects, and that's all we're after," she said.

Brown is involved in the Construction Equity and Inclusion Council (CEIC), dedicated to defining, spotlighting and advocating for equity and inclusion in the construction industry, and collaborating on issues of importance, with the goal to harness the power of the collective and influence policy and best practices. "It's not enough just to have a conversation—everybody's talking about inclusion," she said. "Things are changing; things have changed; and they'll change even faster in the future. And we can either help lead or drag our steel toes."



## Denise Carnahan

Human Resources Coordinator  
T&K Roofing & Sheet Metal Company Inc.

**Job Must-Have:** *"A Pepsi on my desk at 6:30 a.m. sharp. Truly, my coworkers—having a great group of people to work with is all that matters at the end of the day."*

It takes a strong, focused person to develop and implement a program that turns the safety culture at a contracting company from one where hazards on the job are "just a cost of doing business" to one with 5 consecutive years of zero recordable cases and zero lost-time incidents.

For Denise Carnahan, it's been her greatest career achievement—but not because of the safety records and awards. And there's been a lot of those—T&K Roofing Company & Sheet Metal Company Inc. has received the Midwest Roofing Contractors Association's highest level of achievement for safety for 5 years running and the Iowa/Illinois Construction Labor and Management Council's highest-level safety award for the last 12 years. For Carnahan—who is quick to say she was only part of the equation in the company's safety revolution—it's her biggest achievement because it helps ensure every employee goes home safely at the end of the day.

"Every one of our guys has a life outside of this job. I want them to have the drive to do their jobs well and safely," Carnahan said.

She said her work surrounding T&K's safety culture has been much the same as her career in construction overall: It hasn't always been easy, but it has always been worth it. She likes to start her days early. That way, if the jobsite crews need her, they can get in touch before the day starts. She also likes to spend time on the jobsite when she has a chance. "I like to get out there with them and learn what they're doing, if possible," Carnahan said. "It also helps me develop a camaraderie with the teams in the field."

That open mind to whatever the job entails is something she thinks women have a particular affinity for, too. "Come to the job with a willingness to learn, and don't be afraid to ask questions," Carnahan said. "Construction is starved for talented workers—and there are both women and men out there who have a lot to offer when placed in the right roles. It would be a shame not to consider this industry; it's full of opportunity."



## Blue Coble

Journeyman Ironworker/Quality  
Control Manager

Local 75 Ironworkers/Derr &  
Gruenewald Construction

**Job Must-Have:** *"My laptop, so I can access all the codes I need on any given day."*

You know that feeling when it's time for a career change? After 10 years as a graphic designer, Blue Coble was ready for a different role. She applied to the ironworkers' union, with design as her fallback. "I fell in love," Coble said. "I loved the physical aspect and being out in the field." In fact, her entire career is a testament to her love for the industry—even though it hasn't always been a walk in the park. The good days outweigh the bad days, though, Coble said. "The positive impacts I have the ability to make on the jobsite are worth more."

The last project I worked on—at an airport—had five women on my company's team alone. I love that I can connect with other women on-site now. It's like having built-in friendships." Off the jobsite, Coble is currently working on a bachelor's degree in industrial hygiene.

She was a safety coordinator in a previous job and moved from that into quality control. She said she enjoys her role as quality control manager because it allows her to be involved in the field but also indulge her (self-proclaimed) nerdy side with all of the codes involved. Although her role doesn't look the same day in and day out, Coble says it's fascinating to be privy to how many different jobs and processes must come together to make a successful end product.

Her advice for women new to the industry? Stick it out, no matter the obstacle. "Take advantage of every opportunity you have—it's all worth it in the end," Coble said. "Women who are coming into the industry now are hungry for success. They are very aware that they are going to have hurdles, and they dive in anyway."

And as for the companies that are hiring those women? Coble doesn't hesitate to answer. "Make room for them," she said. It's as simple as that.



## Mary Patricia Geppert

President  
Geppert Bros. Inc.

**Job Must-Have:** *"All of your necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), of course!"*

Mary Patricia Geppert has worked in the demolition industry for more than 25 years, during which she's overseen some of the largest projects in Geppert Bros. Inc.'s 95-year history. As company president, she not only oversees projects, but also manages the daily office operations, compliance, safety and claim mitigation, accounting, estimating, dispatch, and field operations.

In recent years, Geppert has played a crucial role in the National Demolition Association (NDA) in formulating and implementing its first industrywide safety manual (still in circulation today). Alongside NDA and the General Building Contractors Association (GBCA), she has also helped Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's, city council to rewrite legislature that oversees the area's demolition industry after the events of the deadly Market Street Collapse in 2013. Geppert, who now sits as the chairperson for the safety committee of the GBGA, says that while women are still in the minority in construction, they have a growing voice. "When I first began in this industry 20+ years ago, instances of seeing a fellow woman within the construction/demolition industry were truly few and far between. What I saw even less of was women working in the field as tradespeople, as opposed to administrative office workers. Those demographics are continuing to favorably shift as well, though," Geppert said.

Geppert Bros. Inc.'s motto, "Tearing down to make way for progress," also rings true for the United States construction industry itself actively making that progress. Geppert has participated in an array of massive demo projects across the skyline, including nine high-rise structures in the city of Philadelphia and, in particular, one implosion for the Pennsylvania Convention Center expansion project, which, today, still stands as the first and only implosion to take place in downtown Philadelphia.

According to the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), women make up 9.1% of the U.S. construction workforce. Geppert hopes that number will rise and encourages fellow business owners to seek out women for recruitment possibilities in the continuing worker shortage. To those women joining the industry, Geppert cautions, "Expect that you will have to prove yourself. Understand that you may have to interact with some individuals who still aren't used to seeing or working with women in the industry. Don't be afraid to show them that you know what you're talking about. In time, you'll begin to change their perspective on the matter and will garner a different respect from them."

"My grandmother owned a residential building company in the 1960s," said Marilyn Grabowski. "As a kid, I played on foundations and picked paint with her." Still, Grabowski never thought she would go into construction. She pursued pharmaceutical sales and marketing before ultimately coming back to the industry that helped make her. "It's in my blood," she said.

When she met her husband Tommy at 40, he was working for a paving company that had no cash flow or marketing strategy. But Grabowski saw the potential. "We bought a piece of the business, and we went out and made it what it is today," she said. She's most proud of the fact that the business employs over 100 people and counting, and she knows each of them individually. "All final-round interviews are still with me," she said—just one reason the company has been able to retain what she calls a "family atmosphere."

As a woman in the construction industry, however, it isn't always smooth sailing for Grabowski. "At cocktail parties, people hear construction and immediately want to talk to Tommy." But this error hasn't stopped her; she knows what she has to offer. Grabowski says women have a great advantage in construction because they are detailed-oriented and good at multitasking, skills that lend themselves to better work in this business.

"You just have to know your work 150%. The moment you walk on the job, the men are questioning whether or not you can assist them well. I've been in this industry 18 years, and, for the first 10, many asked me to 'Please send the man to do the job,'" she said. But Grabowski is seeing some changes, specifically with more women in the civil engineering side of the industry, which she attributes to groups like the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC).

Still, she said, she was recently one of only a handful of women in a meeting of 100 people focused on an airport expansion. This will happen for a while. Her advice for other women in these situations: "Be friendly, persistent and assertive. Walk up and stick your hand out to shake the hands of men. But never be anything but a lady. Don't be afraid to stand out as a lady." And when it comes to this advice, she's definitely walked the walk.



## Marilyn Grabowski

President  
Atlantic Infra

**Job Must-Have:** *"Safety. The mindset of safety is everything. If you have good trade skills, passionate people and safety best practices, you can figure out any job."*



## Emily Herndon

### Marketing Director

CT Wilson Construction Company Inc.

**Job Must-Have:** *"The drone. I had the opportunity to become an Federal Aviation Administration-certified small unmanned aircraft systems remote pilot when my boss decided to perform aerial photography in-house. It is definitely one of the coolest aspects of my job."*

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in architecture, Emily Herndon started her career in construction as a field laborer before being trained as a project manager. "While I was learning to manage projects, executive management thought my design background would be useful for assisting with the company's marketing efforts," Herndon said. After a few years, she found she was more passionate about the marketing role she was creating for herself than the project management role. Today, at age 29, Herndon is CT Wilson Construction's first and only full-time marketing director, and recently received the Executive Spotlight Award for creative talent from the National Association of Women in Construction.

"There's no question the industry needs more workers, and women represent a demographic of people who have been historically underutilized. As the construction industry continues to grow and become more complex, women can leverage this opportunity to pursue various positions in the industry," Herndon said.

Having a culture that supports employee development, open communication and fairness, she said, has contributed to her success in construction. While many women have faced conflict, Herndon said she's met more resistance due to her age and position than she has for being female. "Even my younger male coworkers have struggled managing older men who have decades of experience and are resistant to someone younger than them trying to tell them how to do their job," she said.

Herndon's advice for the incoming generations is to disregard the naysayers. "Regardless of what type of prejudice you face, communication and collaboration are necessary to keep the project moving forward. Ignorant people are everywhere. Forget about them. Be willing to hear your critics, rectify your mistakes and move forward without letting it hold you back," she said. "I am valued for my mind and demeanor—not my gender—and I am indebted to the sacrifices of those who went before me to make that possible."

Isha Kassen has done it all in construction. "I sort of fell into construction when I was 19 or 20 and began working for a home builder. Through it, I met a friend whose family owned a mechanical contracting business. I did payroll, accounts receivable, all kinds of pieces. I was actually the front-desk girl when I started at U.S. Engineering Company," she said. Kassen has worked in a variety of settings, too—from nine-person, mom-and-pop shops to firms of over 100. From the diverse and inclusive to the not-so-much, she's nearly seen it all.

Because she didn't take the traditional 4-year college path, being approached by executives and asked to become a project manager is Kassen's greatest accomplishment in her eyes. "I can understand and appreciate everyone's role because I've been in most of them," she said. According to her, it's been an invaluable tool and the basis of her advice to women entering industry: "Don't disregard any info or anything someone is trying to teach you. It all matters, even if it doesn't seem relevant at the moment." These are words she says to Pittsburg State University's construction management students as she fills them in on their options to become mechanical contractors and general contractors, too.

On her beginnings in the industry, Kassen said, "When I was coming up through my career and I found myself on-site in the field, not only was I a woman, but I was young. And I felt like the older, more tenured field men and tradesmen would either take me under their wing and want to teach me things, understanding I was serious and taking the time to really explain processes, or they would call me 'hon' and 'babe.' You had to have thick skin to be a young woman on the project site."

But it's different now than it was 10 or 20 years ago, she says. "Sometimes, I'm the only female I see all day, but more and more, I'm seeing women in both field and office positions." One of those women, a Ford engineer Kassen met at a plant shutdown in Kansas City, Missouri, taught Kassen how to be a woman in the field by example.

"I never wanted to bring any attention to the fact that I was female," Kassen said. "This woman wore pink from head to toe—things I didn't even know you could get in pink. But no one messed with her because they knew she meant business, and she was respected." Through this woman, Kassen said she learned that you can be both feminine and powerful in a male-dominated industry—something she's clearly mastered.



## Isha Kassen

### Vice Chair for Construction Leadership Council Steering Committee

### & Project Manager

U.S. Engineering Company

**Job Must-Have:** *"Chapstick. I have 100 of them stashed all over the place."*



## Amanda (Mandi) Richalle Kime

Director of Safety

Associated General Contractors of Washington

**Job Must-Have:** *"I should say personal protective equipment (PPE), but I have to say your smile. It's your brand, and it's how you connect with people. You never know who you are going to encounter on the jobsite, but a simple smile will open so many doors. And it's better than the alternative."*

For the past 12 years, Amanda (Mandi) Richalle Kime has served in a director-level position at the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) and was the youngest person to ever fill one. Her role includes the tasks of administering the safety team program and conducting jobsite audits for contractors to help develop their safety programs. "We're like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) without a ticket book. If we see something missing from a program, we offer advice and resources for improvement," Kime said. "We often see people on their darkest days professionally. I'm not there to lead an investigation, but to act as support. When bad stuff happens, you want someone in your corner representing you."

Kime provides support for the disadvantaged. For years, she's played a large role in developing AGC's diversity and inclusion program. "It's about creating the kind of environment where people want to go work. We spend more time with coworkers than we do with our family. That parlays into mental health, into diversity, into inclusion ... There are so many ways in which having the right culture makes it one where people want to be," she said.

For women in particular, Kime believes that having this level of support in the same way AGC has provided it to her can be the driving factor in personal success. "I wish that someone had come to me earlier in my career and said, 'You can do it all.' Unapologetically. You can be married and have kids (if that's your journey), or you can do none of that. Other people don't get to dictate to you what your potential is," Kime said. "If you're a working mom, let's face it, everyone wants you to act like you don't have a job, but then you are supposed to turn around and work like you don't have kids. You have to set appropriate boundaries and have a good balance. You can still kick ass at a lot of things."

Kime says it's not just about making the workplace better, but also improving the way we talk about construction to the next generation to ensure there's an incoming workforce. "The way we encourage folks to consider a career in construction is huge. If we all start working a little harder to see what we all might have in common, we find out that those things are connected. That connection helps us welcome people of different backgrounds and experiences, and when we do that, we get better solutions to our problems."



## Tiffany LaBruno

Director of Professional Services  
Gafcon

**Job Must-Have:** *"Tech, of course! Specifically, Microsoft Teams and OneNote, because the tools allow me to work on multiple devices and collaborate with my team in real time."*

A woman working in construction is rare enough, but a woman working in construction technology—that's a unicorn, according to Tiffany LaBruno. She's proud to say she's not the only one out there, though. She manages a team of 10 in her role with Gafcon, and eight of them are women. After getting her start as a project administrator for a multifamily contractor in California, LaBruno went to work as a consultant with the Navy Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC). She helped manage the construction battalion's projects and facilities finance system for 20 years. She made the move to Gafcon 6 years ago.

Although Gafcon is software agnostic, her role is focused on helping guide the company's team managers and project owners through program implementation, life-cycle reporting, etc. She is also charged with setting standards on Gafcon projects for process optimization, requests for information (RFIs), submittals, safety reporting, building information modeling (BIM) and more. Put simply, her team goes into a fairly low-tech environment and works to generate a passion for tech usage on the jobsite.

"When you're facing the adoption of technology—especially when you are working with people who have never used tech [on that level]—being empathetic and listening to team members' fears is the only way to work toward a collaborative environment," LaBruno said. "We're still using paper and clamshell phones in this industry—it's got to change."

One big step forward? LaBruno says it's important for newcomers to the industry, as well as those not even considering it as a career path, to know that construction is not just heavy lifting. "The lack of resources in construction is really hurting us," LaBruno said. But, she says, the only way to change that is to change the perception of what the industry has to offer someone looking for a lucrative, challenging career.

On a company level, LaBruno credits Gafcon as an excellent example of what organizations should be doing. "Gafcon is a company that recognizes excellence in employees and has a clear-cut plan for promotion," she said. She advises looking to the current workforce to see underlying values and company culture. "If you're working for a company where everyone looks the same, you pretty much know that may not be a place you want to go." Last but not least, find a mentor. "Find a group to network with. The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) is a great place to start."



## Sandra Lawson

**Director of Operations**  
Venture Construction Group  
of Florida Inc.

**Job Must-Have:** *"More time in the day. There's never a dull day in my job—it is consistently busy."*

If you want to see an example of climbing the corporate ladder, look no further than Sandra Lawson. In 2005, she joined the team at Venture Construction Group of Florida Inc., which was under another name at the time, as a part-time receptionist. Over the years, she gradually learned every division of the company.

She's now approaching her fifth year as director of operations. In this role, she oversees every department of the company, including production of all projects, sales managers, multiple branches of offices, and philanthropic efforts. Managing all of that takes an organized mind and a lot of hard work, but it's a dynamic role to play, Lawson said.

"My biggest career achievement was starting off in that entry-level post and working my way up to where I am now," Lawson said. "It's part of my value system—if you're dedicated and you work hard, you will see progress. Plus, being a woman in a [predominately] male industry, it's satisfying to make it to this point."

That positive attitude, a good work ethic and attention to detail are all traits she sees in many of the women she works with, within her own company and with the trade partners she works with daily. "Women are used to multitasking, whether you're a mom or you're in an executive position at a company—or both. And we're used to listening to what's going on around us," Lawson said.

What's important to remember, though, is that everyone is on the same team, Lawson said. "Work together, instead of against each other. There's a lot of younger women in our business coming in, and I try to continually remind them of that. Keep persevering—this is a rewarding career if you do so."

Respect and responsibility are two aspects of a career in construction that, for Kabri Lehrman-Schmid anyway, have been hard-won but worthy of the challenges. Lehrman-Schmid was originally a civil engineering student, but she saw the work happening on the Pentagon renovation project and decided she wanted to be involved. "I walked up to a superintendent on-site and asked for an internship," Lehrman-Schmid said. She landed the job, and decided to pursue a career in construction. According to her, it was the best thing she could have done for herself.

Now a project superintendent, Lehrman-Schmid has been working with Hensel Phelps for more than 12 years. She's worked in both field and office management roles—Hensel Phelps expects each employee to spend time in both, and, once they reach a middle management position, decide which path they want to pursue. Lehrman-Schmid is responsible for the safety quality and coordination of all the trades on her particular jobsite. She's been in the role for 3 years, and said she loves getting to coordinate with trade partners face to face.

The role she is currently in is one she's proud of, but not because of the title. "It's because I've had to earn the respect of the people who have supported me in this position and the teams I work with on the jobsite," Lehrman-Schmid said. Because of this management role, Lehrman-Schmid feels she has a responsibility to the industry to use her platform. "Although networking events have never really been my thing, I know I have to get involved, support other women in the field and be a resource for women who want to enter the field," she said.

And that's just what she's done. Lehrman-Schmid has been a national conference speaker at events for the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), the Construction Management Association of America, Procure's Groundbreaking Women in Construction, and the Associated General Contractors of America. She also serves as the NAWIC Puget Sound board director and has worked to forge many relationships with Seattle, Washington-area, women-specific construction organizations, including Sawhorse Revolution, Women Leaders in Construction and more. Her work with the Seattle-area groups has led to a leadership roundtable series for industry women in the area. She's also spoken at national conferences and is involved in work aimed at generating support for LGBTQIA+ representation in the trades and extensive volunteering efforts.

Speaking of support, Lehrman-Schmid is quick to say she has found nothing but support in her journey in construction, but notes she comes to the job willing to learn, listen and work her butt off. The challenge she currently sees in increasing female representation in construction is due to silos. "We have all these amazing organizations making progress, but often, there is no united front," she said. "By being able to connect the dots between all of these organizations working toward one common goal, we can really help each other and the industry." She urges women not to limit themselves based on their own perceptions of what the industry can offer. "There are so many different interfaces in this field. It's a people-focused industry, so if you're up for a challenge, jump in!"



## Kabri Lehrman-Schmid

**Project Superintendent**  
Hensel Phelps Construction Co.

**Job Must-Have:** *"My Day-Timer leather folio. I've had the same one since I started, at the suggestion of a mentor. It allows me to make notes on projects and continually follow up. It also helps buck the idea of the field management being team members who sit on their phones all day."*



## Peggy Hogan Marker

President  
Marker Construction Group

**Job Must-Have:** "Purell and a sweater because I'm a germophobe and jobsites are always cold. Of course, this is in addition to a hard hat and work boots."

To women considering careers in construction, "I say definitely go into the industry. There is a lot of opportunity here for women," Peggy Hogan Marker said. "Make the effort and learn as much as you can to be that much more successful. Be prepared—it's male-dominated. There's going to be rough language, and you will frequently be the only woman in the room. So, get comfortable with that and be assertive."

Marker grew up in her family's construction company and later married a contractor. The couple then started their own firm. "I've been blessed to have rarely run into someone who gave me a hard time by being disrespectful and dismissive because I'm a woman," she said. "I'm aware that my position makes me unique, as I'm not necessarily in the trenches. Coming from a position of power, I'm given a bit of a waiver, if you will. And I know that. There are people out there holding onto the belief that women aren't suited for the industry."

But Marker doesn't agree. "I think women are great multitaskers and highly organized—more so than their male counterparts—particularly in management positions. And when things get heated on a jobsite, women are able to take the testosterone down a notch and resolve the issue."

But she thinks men are no less uniquely suited, and it's the job of both parties to foster inclusion and diversity. "It has to be a focus of every company. There can be zero tolerance for sexist behavior. Team members who aren't as progressive as they should be need to be educated and held to a higher standard," she said. And she's proud to work at a company that does just that. "Our company is 40% women, all of whom are smart and successful and respected."

Of being honored in CBO, Marker said, "The awards I've won are amazing and incredibly flattering. It's nice to be recognized, especially as a woman in industry. I think my daughter and her friends seeing women being recognized is powerful." But what is Marker most proud of? "My greatest achievement is not an award, but the satisfaction of seeing our company be successful and our team members thriving and excited to be here."

"I work with a young female engineer at Balfour Beatty, who came from our United Kingdom headquarters," said Christine M. McAnney. "One day, not long after she'd been working in the United States, she pulled me aside and said, 'In the U.K., I felt my opinions weren't valued as they are here.' And I think that's a huge step forward for the industry," said McAnney. In an industry that had no women in C-suite positions when she entered, McAnney says this is a testament to how far construction has come.

Still, she says, "There aren't even enough people in the industry, but we're missing 52% of the population—women." She's working to help change that, though. In 2008, the general counsel of granite construction at Balfour Beatty gave McAnney a list of other general counsels for large construction firms and proposed she get them together to form an industrywide ethics and compliance initiative. The Construction Industry Ethics and Compliance Initiative (CIECI) was born.

CIECI has grown from 11 to 44 members, all focusing on greater inclusivity and diversity. "It's been nice to see the influx of women and industry groups for women," McAnney said, noting that she used to sit in boardrooms with mainly white, male men. "But they, too, want to add more diversity," she said. "They know women can do it."

But it's more than a case of women simply being able to do the work. They can do it well and bring a unique skill set. "I think women solve problems with a different mindset than men. Construction isn't about making widgets or sitting in manufacturing and pushing a button for identical outputs. The industry will benefit from a different view. And the more diversity you have, the more mindsets and better outcomes you'll have."

And it seems she's changing minds in the field, too. "I worked with very old construction guys when I first came in," she said. "On the first day, one of them told me he didn't like lawyers, and I told him I was sure he would come to like me. Many years later, when he retired, that same man told my boss that hiring me was the best thing Balfour Beatty ever did."



## Christine M. McAnney

Vice President & General Counsel  
Balfour Beatty U.S. Civils

**Job Must-Have:** "It's not something tangible you need; it's safety and ethics. Without them, there is no industry. We have to be honest, trustworthy experts."



**Vicki O'Leary**  
**General Organizer**  
 Ironworkers International

**Job Must-Have:** *"An open mind. Stay humble, keep learning and try new things. Work through your fears and know when to choose your battles. That—and a good pair of work boots."*

For Vicki O'Leary, a career in the trades all started with a bet. Her brother and father were both ironworkers, and following a discussion over the dinner table, O'Leary set out—with her mother's blessing—to prove that she was just as capable of doing iron work as her brother.

Thirty-four years later, O'Leary has a long list of accomplishments under her belt as an ironworker, including serving as the chairwoman of the North American Building Trades Union's Tradeswomen's Committee (NABTU); instituting a groundbreaking paid maternity leave program (6 months pre-delivery and 6 to 8 weeks postpartum paid leave) for female ironworkers; and the Ironworkers International (IW) "Be That One Guy" program aimed at fighting workplace harassment on an individual level. This year, O'Leary won Engineering News Record's 2019 Award of Excellence for her work to create a more inclusive industry. When O'Leary lists her greatest accomplishments, though, becoming a journeywoman and being the first woman working for IW are among them.

"I'm not going to pretend it was easy, because it wasn't," O'Leary said. "The best ironworkers aren't the strongest ones, though even the strongest ones will get broken down in this trade. Women in construction should rely on their mental strength over their physical strength whenever possible. I mean, come on, we can have a baby without drugs. We can do this." According to O'Leary, that mental strength is something that her female peers in the industry use to their advantage. "The women I know are incredible problem-solvers. They don't always assume they know how to do something, but they use their brains," she said.

O'Leary has made it a lifelong focus in her career to advocate for an industry that is more inclusive, and her advice is two-fold, including what you can do as an individual and why you need a community around you: Attempt to be that one guy—or woman—on the job that speaks up for positive change on your team. But don't go it alone. "The industry will only change when the people working in it demand change. Advocate for diversity in supervision and instructors. Recruit more women and minorities. Listen to other women, minorities and LGBTQ working groups. We're all stronger together."

Starting, growing and running a successful business is a difficult feat for anyone. For Guiomar Obregon, it's a challenge she was and still is all too ready to take on. She and her husband started their civil construction contracting company, Precision 2000 Inc. (P2K), in 1998. The couple, both civil engineers, saw a need for more minority-owned companies and an opportunity for growth through ongoing construction work at Atlanta, Georgia's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

While Obregon was more than qualified for the job (she holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and master's degrees in civil engineering, business administration and finance), she said she was forced to learn on the job for many years.

Twenty-one years later, P2K is a midsize company competing with a number of larger, more established companies for work. Obregon said it is often challenging to win bids when going up against larger competitors, but challenges are something P2K is well-versed in handling. "Over the course of the company, we've had to overcome many obstacles. My best achievement has been leading the company through those difficult times," Obregon said. "We've learned many lessons from them—how to be efficient, how to be flexible, and how to navigate any issue that comes our way. We've come to see challenges as opportunities in hiding."

And as a woman working in construction, Obregon sees an environment ripe with opportunity. "We are so few, so there is lots of room for growth. We have to make a concerted effort to increase representation at all levels," she said. Obregon voiced optimism that the industry is on the right track toward making this a reality but still has lots of work to do.

"From recruitment to retention, we have to make the industry more open to women, and there needs to be a stronger support system in place for women who are already in the industry," Obregon said. "This includes greater accessibility to mentors and those looking to mentor. We currently work reactively where women in the industry are concerned, but we should be preparing them for the potential challenges that lay ahead." After all, those challenges aren't necessarily challenges—just opportunities for growth.



**Guiomar Obregon**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
 Precision 2000 Inc. (P2K)

**Job Must-Have:** *"A challenge—projects out of our team's comfort zone give us a chance to show our potential."*



## Debbie Michelle Rodriguez

President/Owner

Competitive Edge Partners & Consulting LLC

**Job Must-Have:** "My 'iBuild' armband—it's construction orange, and it ties all my worlds together."

Debbie Michelle Rodriguez is no stranger to the industry and its fluctuations. In her 21 years in construction, she's worked in day labor, human resources and as chief operations officer of her own consulting firm, which she began in 2008. In 2013, however, she tired of traveling and longed to make a community impact through the industry she loves so much. Thus, Rodriguez founded iBuild Central Florida, a nonprofit focused on eradicating the public stigma attached to construction and trade positions, and helping young adults realize the validity of those career paths—a feat Rodriguez said is her greatest achievement.

"In the area, we have a huge influx of Venezuelans escaping communism, which I experienced through my own parents' immigration from Cuba. Now I get to help these people. We're teaching them how to be carpenters, plumbers and electricians. We teach them English, as well, and because I'm fluent in Spanish, it's easy for me. These people go on to make good money," she said. And nothing makes Rodriguez happier. "I had a full ride to go to college, and I just wasn't college material," she said. "I respond, 'the school of hard knocks,' when I'm asked where I went to college."

Any challenges Rodriguez has faced as a woman in the industry have only served to propel her forward, rather than hold her back. "People can sit back and take challenges, or they can make those challenges into something. I am Hispanic and a woman, and still I walk around and do everything I should. You deal with what you allow. Sure, people have made sideways comments to me, but at the end of the day, it's how you respond that matters," she said.

Rodriguez encourages others to "embrace being a woman in this industry," too. The temp staffing she does at her company is some of the hardest work, especially as a woman, because people think it's where failures go to find employment. But it's in that work she most clearly sees the real value of women in construction.

"By teaching women trades, you take away barriers for them, and it has been so much more effective than teaching men," she said. "Women hold the world together. And now people are starting to realize that because we are making time to stand up for ourselves. We're finally realizing our value, too."

Eighteen years ago, Julie Schafer joined Aurora Builders Inc., where she is now a project manager. She left the company during the Great Recession and joined Community Connections, a nonprofit for homeless women and children. She returned to Aurora after 5 years, but brought with her the determination and passion for the education of young women. A point of pride for Schafer is the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) program she created in participation with Girls Inc., a nonprofit organization with the central goal of empowering and inspiring girls and young women.

The Girls Inc. STEM program provides year-round, after-school programming, weekend activities and experiences that expand upon and support girls' STEM learning and engagement. Through hands-on activities, girls can explore, ask questions, persist and solve problems. By interacting with women and men pursuing STEM careers, girls can come to view these careers as exciting and realistic options for themselves and they get the chance to see how STEM makes the world a better place.

"We connect with local community leaders who specialize in [STEM] projects to talk to the girls about what they do day to day," Schafer said. "The Girls Inc. program has since received a \$100,000 grant to build a high school and middle school, and we intend to follow them and hook them up with a nonprofit here called Builders Care to build ramps for those in wheelchairs."

Schafer's drive for education extends to the professional level as well. She is a participating member of local home builders associations and sits on the council of the NAHB Professional Women in Building, whose goal, she said, matches her drive for education. "The council decides how to provide ongoing education to female employees and how to reach younger women. We have to help women network with the right people and get them to the next level. And that starts with business owners," Schafer said. On the jobsite, Schafer says people still sometimes assume she's the homeowner, rather than the PM. But that only fuels her passion.

Schafer's advice for women entering the industry and those looking to advance the cause? Get girls into the trades early. "I can't express how important field time is for them. The more you're out in the field, the more you know," she said—experience Schafer gained firsthand. "Empathy, which is not necessarily always present on the jobsite, is what makes compromises work, and women have that in spades. You can't work outside of the box without empathy." Schafer also said that communication—the ability to read a situation and not automatically thinking you know best—is also a crucial component to success.



## Julie Schafer

Project Manager  
Aurora Builders Inc.

**Job Must-Have:** "Builder Trend software on my iPad—it's impressive and essential. Mostly for residential builders, it houses project information and connects owners with subcontractors, with updates in real time. Subs can work in it and immediately see the building schedule and any updates."



## Elizabeth Vereen Sisson

Owner/Operator  
Grand Strand Builders LLC

**Job Must-Have:** *"My DeWalt tape measure. My guys always steal it, so I keep it under my car seat."*

"There are no women in construction. Go do something else." That's what Elizabeth Sisson's father told her when she called home during her senior year at college and said she wanted to come home to work for him at his construction company. So, instead, she graduated and practiced environmental law for 6 years before coming back to work at the family firm anyway. When her father retired in 2009, she opened her own construction company, Grand Strand Builders LLC.

To help other young women avoid the same career detour, Sisson said, "industry associations will have to reach out to women purposely. It will take focusing on trades in high schools and encouraging girls to take part."

As for what makes women so well-suited for work in the industry, she said, "[Some] men will just throw something up without thinking of its functionality in the end. Women seem to naturally think more creatively." Still, though, the industry has come a long way, Sisson knows a place won't be made for women easily or organically. When asked how she dealt with the barrier to entry, she said, "My mother raised me to very independent, vocal and secure in my abilities. So, I don't let men make me feel like I'm less. I do get the occasional person not realizing I'm the contractor, or assuming I'm not." But she deals with it by being assertive and proving her abilities—something she's proud of.

She's also proud of her company. "What we like to brag about the most is that we are not the cheapest out there because we want to build things right the first time," she said. "I don't have clients call me back because things broke or don't work anymore. You can get cheaper [contractors] than us, but those contractors are probably going to cut corners, and you're going to lose in the long run. I'm most proud of the fact that we don't have callbacks. Our goal is to always do it right the first time."

Fifteen years ago, Jamie Vanek was an elementary art teacher in Pennsylvania. When she and her husband relocated to Virginia, she decided it was time to take a leap. She was initially placed as a temporary employee with a federal construction company in 2007. That grew into a full-time position as a project manager's assistant—her introduction to project management in federal construction. Vanek credits employers who didn't hesitate to force her out of her comfort zone as one of the biggest reasons she is in her current role as vice president at Valor Construction group.

"These days, we see more women who start their construction path in the field. But many women start in the office, and it's difficult to break free from that," Vanek said. For her, breaking out of her administrative role took a lot of hard work and self-education. When she went to work for TST in 2013, she started in an administrative role but moved to project management shortly thereafter.

Almost 7 years later, she has worked in a variety of roles for the company, including multiple roles in project management and, just prior to her current role, joint venture program manager. That last role had quite the learning curve, too. "When you're managing a project, it's very linear. Managing an overall team requires keeping track of a lot of moving parts," Vanek said.

In the midst of role changes, Vanek was diagnosed with cancer, and finding a balance between her work and her personal life is one of her greatest achievements to date, she said. "It was important to me that I maintained my workload while I was undergoing treatment to maintain a sense of normalcy and keep my mind and body active." One of the projects during that period was a \$4.5 million build. It received a safety award and an industrial excellence award from the Associated Builders and Contractors of America.

Through it all, she's worked hard to continue educating herself. It's something she recommends for anyone in the industry, no matter your gender. First, do your homework, and second, find a mentor, Vanek says. "It doesn't have to be a woman, either. My mentors have been men, and they have been incredibly helpful to my career."

Vanek is not quiet about her aversion to being pigeonholed into one position. She said one important step toward building a more inclusive industry is staying away from that. Vanek warned against assuming based on someone's background, gender, race or current role that they would be best suited in any one job. They may not have had the chance to get exposure or educate themselves about the opportunities available.



## Jamie Vanek

Vice President  
Valor Construction Group,  
a TST Company

**Job Must-Have:** *"The right team—100%. Your environment and the people you work with will make or break your experience in construction."*