

More Than Ever, **WOMEN** are Building a Career in Construction

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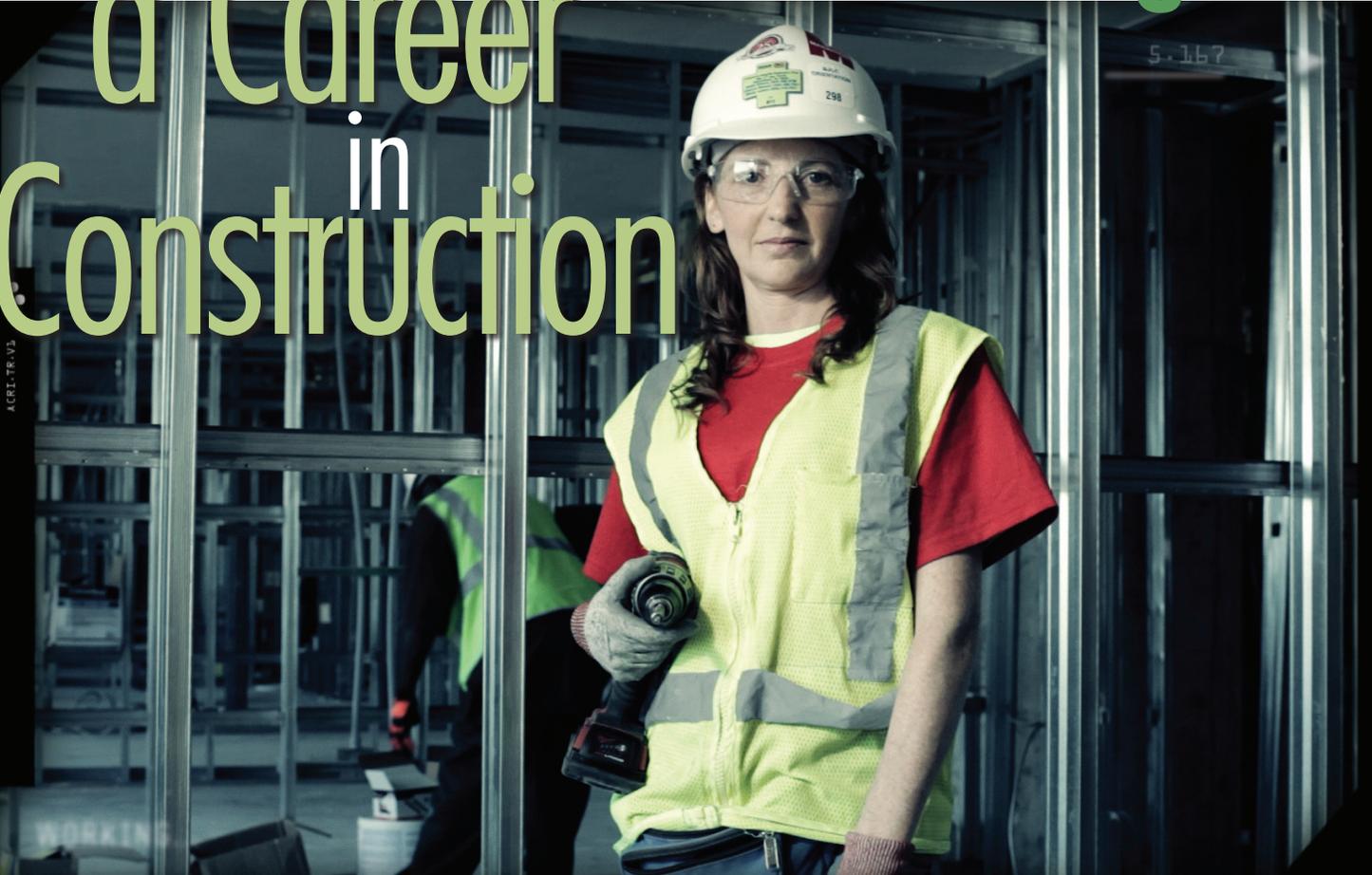


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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 9,813,000 people working in the construction industry in 2014. Of these, 872,000 — 8.9 percent — were women. Yet, CLMA® data predicts the construction industry will see a workforce shortage of two million craft professionals by 2018.

One has to wonder...where are the women?

By Shannon Savory

Jacquelyn O. Blakley has worked in construction for 23 years. She came to know the industry as a young girl; her dad was a welder and during the summer, she would visit him, along with her mom, and take him picnic lunches. As a family, they'd sit on giant I-beams and while her parents caught up on the day's events, Blakley would watch structures in the distance come together. "I knew the piece that I was sitting on would eventually become a part of those structures," she recalls.

Blakley wanted to follow in her father's footsteps and become a welder. "It sparked such an interest," she explains. "Even as a young girl, I knew that I wanted to work outside, build things and be part of a team."

But when the time came to choose her career path, Blakley wasn't sure which direction to turn. She tried electrical engineering and basic circuit classes, but knew she wanted to be more

involved in design. “I knew deep down that I wanted to see my projects come to life; that I wanted to be a part of the construction.”

And that’s exactly what she does for Southern Company, as Regional General Manager of Projects and Construction.

But she does much more, too. Blakley is involved with a Southern Company initiative called Girls Can, which is a summer camp that provides girls a one-week opportunity to learn skills in various trades, including carpentry, electrical wiring, architectural design and welding.

In fact, this past summer it was Blakley herself who donned a welder’s mask and taught the girls the basics of the trade. In addition to trying out career paths that they may not have even considered, the girls benefited from something more—a boost in confidence.

“To me, that’s the main thing,” says Blakley. “We are giving them a safe environment where they can discover together, without any competitive pressure from male peers, that these are skills they can become passionate about and some day, pursue as real career options.”

Blakley hopes this is the case, noting that the rewards from working in construction are many. “I wish all young girls knew the benefits because I think if they saw real women, like me, succeeding in these roles, they’d be more willing to give our industry a try.”

Try, And You Can Succeed

For Heather Marshall, trying was crucial to finding her place in the industry. As manager of the Americas Construction Estimating Team for Air Products & Chemicals, Inc., she spends her days with her team developing the construction execution strategies and costs for building new large Hydrogen and Air Separation (ASU) plants in North and South America.

Marshall explains that she began her career with Air Products through their co-op program, while she was still in university working towards her degree in Chemical Engineering. Once full-time with Air Products in 2004, she already knew, based on these co-ops, that she wanted to work in the field. Air Products rotation program for new hires allowed her to do just that. She spent her first three years working at operating plants

in Texas, Louisiana and California, and during her third rotation, she supported two back-to-back plant turn-arounds for two Hydrogen plants in California.

The ability to try new roles and learn many different aspects of construction gave Marshall both experience and confidence. She has since managed capital improvement projects, has worked direct with contractors at various sites, and has been a senior project manager for a \$100 million dollar project.

Now Marshall, who has more than a decade of experience under her hard hat, showcases the opportunities within the industry to young women who hope to follow in her footsteps. Marshall says that she recently had a young woman approach her, who was a bit hesitant to try a field construction role. Marshall encouraged her, and the woman ended up loving the job.

When young women try out these roles, and succeed, they get a taste for what Marshall enjoys most about construction, which is, “Being part of the construction team, watching the plant go from a paper design to real equipment, pipe and steel, and ultimately to an operating facility.”

This is why she works with the Society of Women Engineers, to promote STEM fields for young women, letting them know that the engineering and construction industries do have rewarding career opportunities for them. “I truly believe that having other women in construction share their experiences and stories will make the construction industry an option for younger women to consider.”

Marshall also feels it’s important to let girls know that the industry’s image of a “boys only club” is not at all accurate. In fact, for Marshall, being a female at a construction site has never been an issue. She says, “I like to specifically address this concern to young women when they ask about my experiences as a female engineer and manager. Both during my time in field operations and field construction, I never had any issues with my male co-workers being disrespectful.”

“If you work for an organization that respects and advocates for women and diversity, others will follow,” she says.

Times Have Changed, Really!

Kimberly Flowers has seen the flip side; a construction industry where she was the only woman on the job. She’s been in the business for over three decades and has held a number of leadership positions, most recently, as Vice President of New Generation for Southern Company.

Flowers says she has held plenty of positions where she was the only woman on the job. “I’ve blazed a few trails,” she jokes. But, joking aside, it is because of trailblazers like her, that women like Heather Marshall are able to say, with truth, that they have never experienced gender bias on the job site.

“There have been many women over the years who demonstrated that they are more than capable of contributing, in a very meaningful way, to all aspects of the construction process,” says Flowers. “This has led to a change in mindset because, honestly, there was no reason not to change.”

From a very young age, Flowers knew that her career path would not follow what was considered to be a traditional career path at the time. She recalls that when she started her first placement at a small construction business in Georgia, everyone knew “a girl was coming!” While her male peers were sent out to actual sites to learn, her manager didn’t feel comfortable giving Flowers the same opportunities.

“It was a different time,” Flowers says. “But change has come, and continues to come. I sat in the audience of a ‘women in operations’ event just a few weeks ago, and I was surrounded by 400 other women, all who touch our industry in some way. It was good to see.”

Building on this momentum is crucial, not just for women, but for the industry. “There is such a need for skilled labor so really, there is opportunity for everyone who is willing to work.”

Flowers believes that being better about branding is essential if the industry wants to appeal to more young girls. “They see right through the ad campaigns where the womens’ hair is styled and their make-up is perfect. We need to show real women being productive in both office and field settings. Let’s

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show these young girls that there is a path forward for them, if they pursue STEM. Let's make it clear that if they are interested in designing skyscrapers, that they can. Or if they want to get their hands dirty, they can do that too."

Building a Career in Construction

Angela Skow knows first-hand that careers in construction come in many varieties. She, herself, is Vice President

within the construction sector for Zurich, where she leads the Controlled Insurance Program book of business, supports large construction management, and develops the national underwriting and service strategy for Controlled Insurance Programs.

For many young women unfamiliar with the industry, the idea of a career in construction brings to mind hard hats and safety harnesses. Skow, though, is a behind-the-scenes contributor. She works with owners and contractors who

want to insure projects through an owner-controlled insurance program, and is directly involved with negotiating contract terms and conditions, long-term planning, and financial structures.

"The opportunities in construction are so vast," Skow says. "The industry touches every part of the economy."

This is why Skow strongly recommends pursuing a career in construction, and notes promoting the rewards at both the K-12 and post-secondary level is so important. "In my opinion, continued focus on K-12 is very important for letting young girls know this industry is an option for them," she explains. "The importance of the STEM program cannot be overlooked, and encouraging our young girls to participate and join these programs is an important start."

Mentoring plays an essential part, too. Skow says that her role as a mentor to young women has been rewarding for her, as well as the mentees. "I have faced many of the issues these women are dealing with and it is valuable to work through those issues with someone who will listen and provide feedback, guidance and understanding. For an individual to recognize and achieve the goals they aspire to, they need to have strong support. Mentorship can provide that extra point of contact."

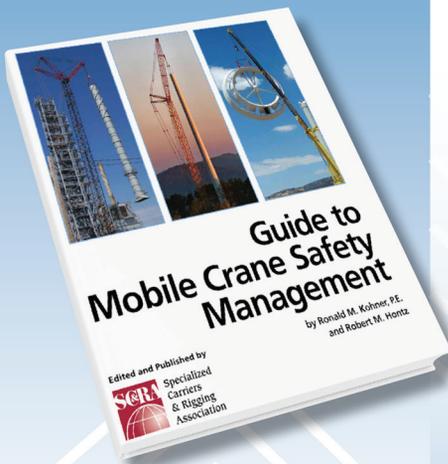
She also says that giving more recognition to women who have had an impact on the industry could make a real difference to young girls who are just starting their careers. "When we see a woman CEO in the construction industry, we often only see her as the business lead of the organization and do not recognize that in many cases, she is an engineer or worked her way through project management and contract negotiations as part of her journey."

Encouragement Makes a Difference

When Yvonne Avila was in her sophomore year of college, she was ready to drop out of engineering. She recalls the meeting with her advisor, during which she was going to inform him of her decision. "He told me I was not allowed to drop out of the program until after I did a co-op," she says.

Turns out, his insistence that she see the real world side of what she was learning

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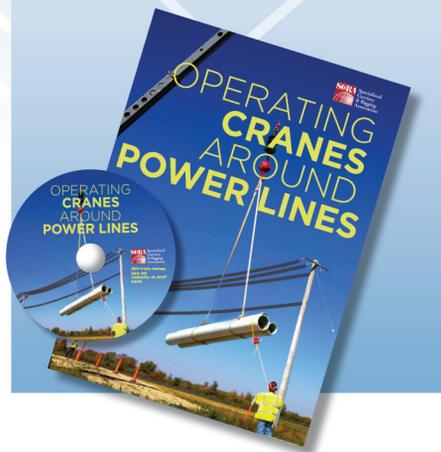


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in the classroom made all the difference. “I was hired by Southern Company as a co-op student in construction, and it changed my life. I fell in love with the work and I saw how much opportunity there was to do really exciting things. I came back to school the most determined student in my class and had a different perspective because I had seen the practical application of all the equations and theories that we worked countless hours to master.”

Avila has been with Southern Company ever since, and currently works as a construction manager. She loves seeing ideas come to life and, at the end of a project, saying “I helped build that.”

“Construction is like Legos for big kids,” Avila jokes. “But it’s not all just about building new things. I have worked on projects involving demolition, and tearing things down is fun too! I get to wear blue jeans and boots to work, and spend a lot of my time outside. Every day is unique on a construction site.”

Avila is lucky in that she had her parents’ support. “They always encouraged me to pursue engineering, even as a young girl.”

Interestingly, she now finds these same characteristics in her young daughter. Jokingly, she admits that she understands why she made her parents crazy with so many questions, because her daughter now does the same to her.

But it’s these questions that may, some day, lead Avila’s daughter to a STEM-related career. And it is Avila herself, who will no doubt support her daughter in this pursuit, should it happen.

Having support is critical to girls’ success, whether it be from parents, guidance counselors or mentors. This is why Avila says that women who currently work in construction should make it their mission to encourage young girls to explore the industry. “In my opinion, the most important focus should be on girls, and for women currently in the construction industry, to reach out to these girls and to plant the seed and help them grow. Not just because they are girls and the industry needs more girls, but because they recognize their gifts and talents.”

She continues that, “Just being a woman in construction and sharing my

story and experiences, rather than making my story be that I am a woman in construction, are inspiration enough for young girls to say, ‘If she can do it, I can do it.’”

Have no Fear

For Allison Kenny, this also rings true. As Engineering Coordinator for Honda of America Mfg., Inc., she spends her days attending site safety meetings and verifying the daily plan for the jobsite.

Kenny has always been interested in construction, but didn’t realize until college what her “fit” would be. She thought she wanted to be an architect but quickly discovered it wasn’t for her. However, when she explored civil engineering, she knew it was the right fit. “I always envisioned myself working for an architectural engineering firm designing buildings. However, while a member of my college’s ASCE chapter, I participated in a few construction site visits. That is when I knew I wanted to be involved in the transition from an idea on paper into an actual structure. It is pretty remarkable!”

For Kenny, working alongside men has never been an issue, noting that many male colleagues have helped shape her career. She says that, “There should not be any fear that just because you are a woman, you cannot do something. Instead, the mentality should be that ‘I am a woman and I am going to prove to others that I, too, can do this just like my male counterparts...if not better!’”

Receiving hands-on education, like Kenny had through her college’s ASCE chapter, is a good place to start, when it comes to attracting more girls to the industry. Kenny says, “Most people have a perception of what they believe a construction profession to be, but until they experience it, they really do not know. I would not be where I am today had it not been for the experiences I had at a younger age.”

These experiences included co-ops with design firms and a summer project with Honda’s Corporate Facilities group, which gave Kenny a hand in the design and construction process. That job turned into full time work and started her on her path to where she is today.

Finding the Right Path

Like Kenny, Riki Lovejoy didn’t always know how she fit into the construction industry. It was trips to construction sites, as a secretary/bookkeeper, that sparked her interest. “What caught my attention was watching a building forming from out of the ground and realizing there is a tangible/touchy-feely reward to a construction project—that I can drive by it in 20 years and know that I had a part in building it.”

Lovejoy, who is President of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), and Owner and President of RFL Consulting Solutions, Inc., says that once she made the decision to work in the industry, she did two things; she searched for a college program that would be geared to construction, and she looked for an entry-level position for a general contractor.

She has come a long way since, earning multiple degrees, opening her own construction consulting business, and leading an association geared towards providing women in construction opportunities for professional development, education, networking and leadership training.

Lovejoy believes that if a young girl has a passion to work in the industry, then she must go for it. And she questions why society pushes GI Joes and construction equipment toys towards boys, and Barbie dolls and Easy Bake Ovens towards girls. She says that it’s up to the industry to push past these stereotypes, and show girls that there are not two sets of rules for men and women.

“The industry is hurting today because of a lack of skilled tradespeople,” Lovejoy comments. “If we are to encourage ANYONE to come into this industry, there needs to be equality in all areas of mentoring, education and leadership growth.”

Lovejoy encourages women to become leaders, push past imbalances, help other women realize how amazing a career in construction can be, and know that, “The past may not have been easy for women in construction, but we have learned a lot and have come a long way. I hope that more women will realize this, join the field, and help to continue to improve the industry.” ●