

FEATURE HOME

A woman's place

Women find their calling in construction

By Meg Flanagan
CORRESPONDENT

It's been a long time since the phrase "A woman's place is in the home" rang true. It's also been a long time since the only occupations deemed "appropriate" for women were teaching, nursing and secretarial jobs. Today, women are found working in all occupations — from farming to emergency services to construction. These types of jobs are known as nontraditional occupations for women.

According to the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, in the year 2006, women were gainfully employed in nontraditional occupations ranging from farmers and ranchers to aircraft mechanics to crane and tower operators, and everything in between.

Women are making a statement in the construction field, as well. According to Francine Townsend, owner and vice president of marketing/marketing director for the Sandcastle Group, located in Marshfield, in the beginning of her career in construction, being a woman had its challenges.

"When we opened our business 10 years ago," she said, "I have to tell you that being a woman in the construction field was just starting to become very well accepted. As compared with 20 years ago, when you would go into the permitting department of a town hall and someone might say, 'Hi sweetheart, what can I do for you?' I've seen a dramatic change. Back then, you could only be a secretary. That has really, really changed."

Townsend actually spent 10 years as a high school English teacher. But a move to this area changed everything.

"Life takes us down strange roads, doesn't it?" she said. "I was a teacher for 10 years, and when we moved to this area, I took a job as a project manager in 1981. In those days, it was different. In general, people would say, 'What?' when they found out I was the project manager. Because it's become more professional these days, I think women are much more accepted."

What Townsend found is that the way she presents herself is what matters.

"I became more assertive, certainly," she said. "And I found I had to learn to dress differently. I had to give up the two-inch heels and skirts when in the field. But there are always people who accept it, and people who say, 'I don't want to work with her.'"

According to Townsend, women are found in the many layers of a construction project, from the architectural side to the sales and marketing side, to the actual construction side. What helped her was to learn all that she could about the industry and let the prejudice and bigotry slide.

"My personality is to take it in stride," she said. "I might say, 'I'll show them' and then just make it happen. I didn't let it hold me back. In fact it motivated me to learn more so I could talk the talk and walk the walk. I found I needed to educate myself. I took every job in this office that I could take. I can



PHOTO COURTESY OF INGE KELLEHER

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read drawings, but I am not the field person."

Inge Kelleher, president of Emerald Excavating, in Plymouth, is another woman who makes her living in the construction industry. Like Townsend, Kelleher moved to the area, saw an opportunity and, as she said, "simply made the commitment."

Being a woman in the "man's" world of construction was not a concern for her.

"You have to understand that our business and my role in our business evolved over time," she said. "There was no sudden arrival of Emerald Excavating with a woman at the helm. During the early stages of our development, we were so preoccupied with staying solvent and with the monetary pressures that came with starting a business in the midst of a struggling economy, being a woman was the last thing I was worried about."

According to Kelleher, the difficulties

encountered in her business were more from individuals rather than the industry itself.

"As I am sure I would have found in any other industry, there are prejudices present in certain people and I am forced to deal with them," she said. "I have always tried to keep a cool head and do what is best for our company. At times, this meant direct confrontation and, at times, it has meant subtle diplomacy."

Being taken seriously as a woman in such a masculine field has not been a difficult thing for Kelleher. She is a woman confident in her sense of who she is and where she came from, and does not believe in behaving a certain way to be taken seriously by her male colleagues.

"I do not think I have tailored my behavior in order to be taken seriously," she said. "I believe they take me seriously because I am organized, confident, energetic and thorough. I suspect that the same charac-

teristics that garner respect for men in our industry are required in order for women to gain respect. I would suggest the only difference, if there is any, is that the absence of any of these qualities may be a greater liability to a woman."

Although she credits dedication and a strong work ethic as the attributes that have made her successful, she is quick to give credit to her team at Emerald.

"I would be remiss if I did not say that my greatest strength is found in those around me who share the duties and responsibilities of running our company," she said.

Townsend agrees. "We simply hire the best candidate that comes through the door. About half of my staff is women. They work in permitting, CAD and project management, as well as the more traditional roles of accounting and office management."

Some words of wisdom from Townsend

to young women thinking about getting into the construction field are: "First thing I would say is get as much education as you can. Admit when you don't know something. Don't try to prove anything. Just be yourself. Don't try to be a man in a man's world."

Kelleher would add, "If a woman desires to follow a path similar to mine, I would suggest that your greatest difficulty and your greatest asset will be keeping an objective perspective and focusing on what is best for you and your business. If you take aim at every person who has difficulty dealing with a woman, your venture will always be embattled. Gather a team around you that you can rely upon, always looking for people who are better at their job than you are. The rules for success are the same for men and women, so do not get caught up in the trap of constantly thinking about the fact that you are a woman."



PHOTO COURTESY OF INGE KELLEHER

Emerald Excavating had its own float, with smaller-scale excavating equipment, in this year's Fourth of July parade in Plymouth.



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