

NAVIGATING THE WORLD OF CONSTRUCTION: A WOMEN'S JOURNEY OF TRUST AND UNCERTAINTY

- Sandy Palmerton, Shapiro & Duncan Project Manager

If a 50 Ton Crane falls on your job site, in the middle of the night, do you hear it? No, of course not, but the thought will keep you awake some nights. It causes you to lay there and think how the heck did I get here and how in the world did it happen?

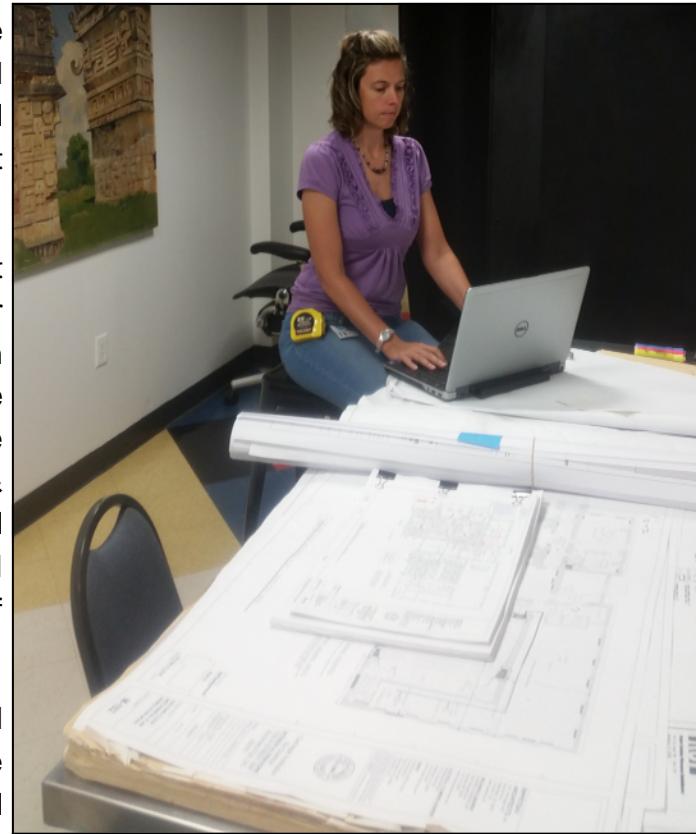
I started my budding construction career as an office assistant at a concrete company which went out of business 2 years after I was hired. That's the volatility of this industry. Reflecting on the past, the closure of my prior workplaces (yes plural) were the most effective stepping stones of my career. My tasks there were administrative based; running payroll, accounts payable & accounts receivable. During my short tenure there I found myself constantly interested in the day-to-day field operations. I would listen intently to the trials, tribulations and challenges of the project managers.

After the concrete company closed, I expeditiously found gainful employment at a local commercial plumbing company. In the beginning I sat happily behind my desk plaque that read "Director of First Impressions." As the receptionist that was the "Title" I was given. I didn't like it much, but when you stop and think about it I guess it was true. I must admit the double digit incoming phone lines were a bit overwhelming at first, but I quickly mastered them and was eager to learn more tasks. After all, I had an image to uphold as "The Director." After a discussion I had with my supervisor, she felt I could help assist multiple departments within the company all while driving the front desk.

I suppose my tenacity caught the eye of our commercial construction manager. After a few short years of maintaining my post and work load, she asked me to join her team and help run the construction projects. The irony there was prior to her job offer, **I often pondered what her job must be like. A female construction manager in the mid 1990's was much rarer than today. How does she navigate a profession where you immerse yourself in dirt, mud, porta potties & skilled tradesmen who are typically male?**

Admittedly, I was apprehensive to accept the offer, but after internally hashing it out, the root source of my apprehension was gender based. That revelation presented a challenge, one which I wanted to pursue.

After accepting the offer, she not only managed me, she mentored me. Before long I was performing project buy outs; processing submittals; analyzing job costs; and submitting close out documents. So instead of my initial childhood fantasies of working in the corporate office dressed in a business suit, I started growing into this non-typical field of employment, one which didn't require pantyhose at all. I was well on my way to climbing the "ladder" when the bad news broke.



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The owner had sold and we were being bought out by a national roll-up. Once the merger was final she found work elsewhere. My mentor and confidant was leaving me and I was then to be fostered by Bill Aitken, a Mechanical Engineer, who I came to know on a personal level, admire and trust. Bill, and I and a few of our technicians were transferred to another local branch also gobbled up in the merger which only lasted a short while before the doors were closed. Yes, out of business again.

Here is where the good part starts. My subsequent employment after the plumbing company is where I am still employed today. Bill Aitken who fostered me after my mentor moved on started to look for new work as well. The interesting thing is he wasn't looking to just save his own career. He began knocking on doors of local HVAC construction companies and marketed himself as a design build engineer that came with a team. He soon made the announcement that he found employment for all of us as a unit at Shapiro & Duncan Inc. I was flabbergasted. After the announcement, I spoke with my husband and family.

It became clear to me that my success was not only dictated by my own efforts, but by the people I had surrounded myself with.

I started out again as an administrative assistant, and soon was offered a promotion to again assist in running HVAC construction projects. This time around the challenge seemed greater as I did not have a female supervisor partnered with the fact that HVAC was not my strong suit. My tenure working in HVAC was relatively short.

Shapiro & Duncan was not afraid to take a risk and put me at the helm. They invested in my education through countless courses and training sessions. The atmosphere fostered here sets you up for success. There has always been a co-worker or supervisor willing to be my sounding board and provide their professional opinion. My supervisor, Charlie Ayres, is not afraid to let me make mistakes, because he sees my passion for the industry and my willingness to learn. He is also a fantastic mentor. Over the years he has given me his advice and coached me on how to handle certain situations all while letting me make my own decisions with regard to running work.

I would like to think that my current position as a Project Manager has been obtained by my willingness to accept the obstacles of the industry; an interest in learning new technologies; being dedicated to upholding ethical treatment of clients and co-workers; and finally, delivering results.

I have learned that the stigmatism of working in a male dominated industry fades away and becomes unimportant if you are focused; perform; and gain the respect and trust of your co-workers. Lastly my advice to women who may be considering a profession in the construction trade is to keep in mind that every profession has pro's, con's, challenges and stereo-types however they all can be overcome. You need to be open to learning from your failures; remain steadfast in your end goal; and have a passion for what you are doing.

Like a lot of other people, I didn't choose my current profession, I grew into it.



Charlie Ayres, Vice President of Service and Special Projects