

In Issue 2019 April, Women In Charge
- By Lynn Geiger

Building Up An Industry: More Women Wanted

Women in the construction and development industry – whether working at jobsites or running companies – are more prevalent than ever before. Still, the overall percentage is small in the male-dominated field. What do they have to say about that? The TCBN talked to four local women who have staked their claim in the world of construction, and hope to see more join their ranks.



Jody Bergman – Vice President-Estimating, Comstock Construction

She was born a Comstock, but that doesn't mean construction was her middle name. "I grew up in a construction family," said Jody Bergman, who initially had no intention of working in the family business.

After earning her undergraduate degree in microbiology in 1976, Bergman realized she needed a break. "My dad said, 'Come on down, we need an estimator,'" she recalled.

Bergman came with experience, having done some job estimating for Comstock in the summer while still in high school. "I was always good at math, and I liked it," she said.

Now, more than four decades later, the Traverse City company is led by the third generation of Comstocks: Bergman and her four brothers.

Bergman said she knows she's where she was meant to be. "I just really enjoyed it," she said of the switch from microbiology to estimating and project management responsibilities. "I enjoy the variety the most. No two days are the same."

The variety of construction projects keeps her job "interesting and fun," she said. "When you build a church, you learn about that religion," said Bergman, whose former clients include Crystal Mountain, Grand Traverse County and the 17-story tower at the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa.

But in the mid-1970s in northern Michigan, Bergman was often one of the only – if not the only – woman in a room full of men. She recalled attending her first bid opening for a project Comstock was looking to land. "The architect asked, 'Whose wife are you?'" she said.

A lot has changed since those early days, but something that hasn't? "As a woman, you sometimes still have to prove yourself with every new group," Bergman said. "They aren't saying you don't belong or are questioning your presence, but they might not be as accepting of what you're telling them."

That might mean more questions, or more double-checking, she said. Even so, Bergman feels the industry is "wide open for women" today. "It's an in-demand field," she said.

She does think it's easier now for young women to "see themselves" in the industry. "There are no restrictions on women for doing any job, if they are capable," she said.

One of the things Bergman has found inspiring from her decades-long career in the construction industry is looking around her hometown with a sense of pride. "Having a hand in building your community," said Bergman. "That sense of accomplishment."

Some of the more recent projects Bergman and the team are leading include the new Immaculate Conception Elementary School in Traverse City and the new Archangel Gabriel Greek Orthodox Church in Williamsburg. "When they start tearing your buildings down ... then you know it's time to retire," she said with a laugh.

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Licensed builder, Mary Hurst has worked in the construction/building industry for 36 years, the last seven at Traverse City's MAC Custom Homes.

Her start in the industry was in accounting for an area lumber company. While there, she met contractors, started learning about the industry and made contacts. Later, after a stint in kitchen cabinetry design, she realized she had a knack for space planning and ultimately started a business with a builder that she ran for a decade.

Now heading up sales and client relations for MAC Custom Homes, Hurst likes that she gets to look at the big picture and then dive in –

from working on the supply side with subcontractors to the clients building their dream homes. "Most of what we do is problem-solving, day in and day out," said Hurst. "If there was a perfect project, it wouldn't be any fun at all!"

Like other women locally who've been in the industry for a few decades, Hurst often found herself standing out in a crowd in those early days. She remembered the first time attending a meeting of the Home Builders Association - Grand Traverse Area in the 1980s. She was in her 20s and was one of maybe four women in the room. After that first meeting, she decided to not go back.

"At that time, I would have never seen myself as president of the group," Hurst said. But she did eventually go back, and wound up serving on the membership committee.

"I really wanted to be involved and thought my experience might be useful," she said. Then, in 2017, she served as vice-president of the board of directors, and led the group as president in 2018. Hurst said the participation of women in the HBAGTA has "risen dramatically," and estimated they comprise 40 percent of the group.

"As far as women in the industry, I don't think there are any limitations because we are multi-taskers, look at the big picture, juggle a lot of things," said Hurst. "If they like working with their hands, there is a lot of creativity and artistry. When I come to work it is a creative outlet."



Maggie Laureto - Partner and Operations Manager, REI Construction Consultants

Maggie Laureto got her real estate license the summer she turned 18 years old. During college she worked for a developer, helping him sell condominiums and later worked for her father's commercial mortgage business in the Grand Rapids area.

Today, she's a partner in a Traverse City construction company she started with husband Jon in 2014. With a background in real estate and an aptitude for organization and business operations, she keeps the office clicking along so the construction projects stay on track. REI's first project in this market was as general contractor for the Washington Place mixed-use development at the corner of Washington and Cass downtown. Its first as developer is TC Lofts on

State Street.

"I love to see jobs from beginning to end," said Laureto, from working with architects to assisting with design to making certain the costs come in right.

Laureto said she's found Traverse City to have a lot of women in the industry, and credits that to having a lot of smaller contractor businesses, more mom and pop-type operations. "Women have natural abilities to multi-task and organize, and there are a lot of women behind the scenes running these businesses."

And there are women in increasing numbers on the job site. "Some of the subcontractors we hire have women on the job site," but there's plenty of room for more, she added.

"I think there's a lot of satisfaction with this type of work," said Laureto, who herself has spent some time working on job sites. "You're doing work with your hands, accomplishing tasks and projects."

"I definitely think there's a huge opportunity for women in all areas," she said, with chances to showcase



Tonya Wildfong – Director of Communications and Marketing, Team Elmer’s

Tonya Wildfong became one of three owners of Team Elmer’s in 2009 when her father retired and sold the company to his three children. As co-owner with brothers Troy and Todd Broad, Wildfong has become a leading female voice in a place where few are heard – in the heavy construction services industry.

What started in 1956 with a crane and dozer is now a company with 14 locations across northern and mid-Michigan. The company employs approximately 460 employees, including 41 women.

Photography by John L. Russell

Wildfong started answering phones at Elmer’s during the summer when she was 16. During college, she spent summers working as a drafts person for project managers of residential driveways and

then as a project manager on residential projects.

Some may be surprised to learn that her original career goal was to be a photojournalist. But when she discovered she wouldn’t be able to have the personal life she desired, she changed course and ultimately earned a bachelor of fine arts from University of Michigan. “After college, I continued as a project manager for residential, light commercial, and subdivision road paving,” she said.

When the company opened multiple locations and needed a person to oversee communications and advertising, she saw it as a good opportunity to utilize her degree and volunteered. When the communications work became a full-time need, she phased out of project management.

Wildfong said she gets her inspiration for her career from the people she leads. “I get to highlight some of the greatest, most hard-working people on the planet,” she said.

What does Wildfong see as the state of the industry for women today? “There is still no line in the women’s bathroom at heavy construction trade shows,” she said. “Our numbers are still on average two percent in the field or 10 percent in professional settings, depending on job description. Compare that to 50 percent of the population.”

Nonetheless, Wildfong said she is seeing “great strides” in the role of women. “The future is what we encourage and promote; how we amplify each other’s voice and mentor the next generation,” she said. “I’ve seen great strides in respect for diversity on construction crews. Though there is a long way to go to allow for different communication styles, different perspectives, and varying interests. One thing remains the same, if you can do the work you can succeed.”

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