



Women in Construction

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Kristi Thompson



Construction is a driving force in the Tahoe economy.

The industry is the third largest employer in Tahoe, with 12.6 percent of the local population working at construction-based businesses. And yet, women are underrepresented in the field.

But some women are pioneers in the industry and have risen to the top of their trades, from engineering to architecture, from contracting to sales. They all agree that women face barriers in construction, but assert the industry benefits from the different perspectives that women contribute, and are optimistic about the future.

Patty Heller

Owner, Manager, and Interior Guide and Outfitter
HELLER CONSTRUCTION



Patty Heller is the matriarch of Heller Construction, the company she and her husband Bob started together 30 years ago. In the '70s, Heller worked in interior design retail, and Bob was a carpenter. The two joined professional forces in 1987 to form what is now a multi-generational family business that specializes in building custom homes. Their sons Cody and Dan are a partner and a carpenter with the company, respectively.

Being a family business is a core value of the company, Heller says, and she feels a lot of pride in her family's work. She isn't blind to the struggles of this industry, which she knows to be competitive, and "financially challenging and mentally and physically taxing." But her passion for the job is what keeps her going.

"I love the process of the creation of a home, from the first client meeting, working with the architects, addressing the needs of the clients, watching our team build the home, to the final walk-through," Heller said. "As challenging as the build might be, when all is complete, there is that magnificent feeling of completion."

When they first started the company, Heller said that she wasn't always recognized as a partner, since she did not do the physical work. But inside the company, she said, her coworkers recognized they wouldn't be able to function without her leadership and efforts.

Heller thinks it's important to have women in the construction industry because they bring a distinctive perspective on how to execute day-to-day tasks, and because they are excellent multitaskers, which she said is important in building. And while she is still sometimes approached differently than her husband, she said that many clients or colleagues are respectful of her 30 years in the business.

Kristine Keck

Account Manager

TRUCKEE-TAHOE LUMBER COMPANY



Sales is never an easy job. But Kristine Keck has the added challenge of having to walk onto job sites where she is often unwelcome and try to sell supplies to people who might not be sure she knows what she's doing. But as top grossing saleswoman at the lumber company, she's proven her mettle.

Keck says it takes humor, charm, and a thick skin to continually approach people who are busy working and would rather not stop to hear her sales pitch. The only advantage to being a woman in her line of work is that people usually refrain from being rude to her. And when trying to get people to listen to you, it doesn't hurt to show up at a job site pregnant.

"It helped when I was cold-calling to waddle up on the job site," Keck said. "How do you not give me a few minutes?"

Building those relationships is her favorite part of the job. If you go into it as anything but yourself, the client will see right through you. But that doesn't mean that there can't be a different Kristine for each client. She knows which people like to joke around, and which want to stay on task and not waste time.

Her strategies are effective, and over nine years she built up almost her entire client base on her own. And after she does hook those clients, the job is not done. She stays busy doing quality control, managing orders, and trying to stay a step ahead of the project by anticipating needs in the project's timeline, often spending eight hours a day on the phone with clients.

Keck said that she is constantly underestimated, but she loves when she can surprise people with her knowledge. It was tough starting out, though, because for a client to call her with a question would mean admitting that she may know something that they don't, which is a tough pill to swallow for a lot of men, she said.

Now that she's in her current role, she likes to mentor others, like the women who work the retail store counter, where she started out. She coaches them to remember account numbers and to smile when you answer the phone, because people can hear it, and it makes a difference.

And they'd be smart to heed her advice, as Keck has twice won supplier of the year for the Contractors Association of Truckee Tahoe (CATT). The single mother of two will also begin pursuing a degree in communications at the University of Nevada, Reno, come fall. As well as she's done thus far, she knows there's always more to learn.

Kristi Thompson

Principal Architect, Vice President, and COO
MWA ARCHITECTURE



From a young age Kristi Thompson enjoyed playing with legos and Tonka trucks, and had a recognizable eye for design. At 11, her parents even let her create the layout for the family's new pool and deck, which she calls her "first real-world design project."

Fast forward a few decades, and now Thompson is a partner at one of the premier architecture firms in Tahoe, with a long list of awards and more than 2,000 projects to its name. Thompson loves that her job involves working with people, and especially helping them. "One of my favorite parts is talking with clients and sussing out what they want, which they can't even articulate most times," Thompson said.

She knew from the get-go that this was a male-dominated career; she estimates that only one in every five students at her engineering college at Cal Poly was female. Years after she was in the minority in her classes, she still counts herself as one of the few women running architecture firms in Tahoe, but she also sees a shift happening, evidenced by the fact that women make up the majority of the current MWA staff.

At her job, Thompson enjoys the mental challenge of listening to the "puzzle pieces" her clients give her, and building a design from them.

Even as a partner in the firm, Thompson still faces a lot of prejudices from clients or even others in the industry about her skills. When she shows up on a job site for a meeting, she said people will assume that she is the wife of the owner of the company, rather than his business partner.

"I have a voice and people realize really quickly that I know what I'm saying and they can trust me," Thompson said. "But I do feel like I have to prove it or else people just assume otherwise."

Thompson said it is important to have female architects since half of the people who use buildings are female, so women should be designing them as well. In Thompson's experience, female clients often believe she more carefully considers their needs, as compared to her male partner.

But getting the same networking opportunities as her male counterparts was a struggle as she ascended in the business. For years, she was shut out of a golf tournament that had key players from the local building industry. Vital connections were being made on the greens and she was on the sidelines.

"All of these guys are up there buddying around and networking, and then throwing each other work because they know each other," Thompson said. "This business is all about who you know, and I wasn't getting that chance. If we aren't invited for whatever reason, we're being held down. We're not at the table."

The tournament organizer initially said it was a "boys weekend" and that Thompson's presence would ruin the event. But finally Thompson got an invite, and she says the new connections helped build her confidence and further her career. It's important for industry leaders to make sure all staff has ample opportunities, she says, and in her current position, she hopes she is doing her part in supporting up and coming female architects.

Joan Jones

Contractor and President

JONES CORDA CONSTRUCTION



Joan Jones spent years in the restaurant industry before she found her passion in construction. She previously ran the food and beverage department at Northstar, and worked as the general manager at Gar Woods. At both of those jobs, building projects fell under her purview, and during these undertakings, she realized she loved construction — everything from having a hand in designing the layout to managing the timeline. Recognizing that the restaurant industry was hard on family life, she decided to pursue a job in construction. Jones' reputation preceded her: Just three days after quitting her current job, she got a call from John Corda, a contractor who owned Corda Construction, offering her a job.

She began with the company as an office manager in 1998, worked her way up into estimating, then project management, and eventually acquired her contractor's license five years ago and became a partner in the company. Corda passed away from cancer last summer, so now Jones is the sole principal of the company. She credits him with being a mentor and really pushing her to move up in a world that she didn't know that she had the acumen to succeed in.

"I thought you had to wield a hammer to become a contractor," Jones said. "What I found is, it's just as hard to run a construction company as it is to do the physical work."

Corda says she especially enjoys the problem solving aspect of the job. She is tasked with taking a client's idea or drawing and making it a reality, which she describes as a complicated process.

Jones said that she has actually been surprised by how accepting people have been of a female contractor. She said that her presence tends to bring “civility” to the worksite, which can tend to be a “blustery” environment. Jones believes women bring a unique perspective to problem solving and has seen female clients often appreciate having a woman to speak with during the building process.

For all of her work in the industry, Jones says she is actually best known for her husband and daughter’s business, the Truckee River Winery, or for her time serving as mayor of Truckee.

“I hope that more women will join the construction field, and realize that there are lots of different roles,” Jones said. “It’s not just how much you can carry ... you can be a smart person, and one doesn’t disqualify the other.”

Darcey Messner

Plans Examiner

TOWN OF TRUCKEE



Darcey Messner has mapped a career path all her own. An engineer by trade, she started as a telecommunications product engineer in San Francisco. After she moved to Tahoe in 1993, she worked for various construction companies and engineering firms around the lake. One day she realized her great passion was green building, or building in an environmentally conscious manner. So she started her own firm in 1999 called EcoEngineering.

In 2005, she found herself halfway around the world, in Pakistan. Following a devastating earthquake there, she signed on to a project that aimed to introduce straw bale technology, which produces quake-

proof homes. After 10 years, the program came to a natural end, when entering the country became more difficult and less safe, and due to the reluctance of the Pakistanis to adopt the technology, Messner said.

“I learned as I got older, there are times when you feel flow in unexpected directions, and if you follow it, magic happens,” Messner said. “But sometimes there’s things you want to happen, but you’re constantly fighting.”

Messner now works as the plans examiner for the Town of Truckee, where she reviews all requests for building permits in the area, and makes sure the plans are up to code.

Though there has been a push to get girls involved in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields at the high school and college levels, Messner says it really starts much earlier in childhood development. She said that young girls aren’t usually next to their fathers looking under the hood of the car when he’s repairing something, and they don’t often take apart the lawn mower. This does a disservice to girls looking to enter engineering down the line, compared to boys who have been tinkering for years. Parents should be encouraging girls to have those same experiences, to see if it sparks a curiosity in engineering.

She has seen great shifts in terms of treatment of different genders in the industry. At her first internship in an all-male firm in Berlin, Germany, Messner said she found out that the day before she started the boss had taken down “girlie posters” that lined his office walls. But she said she has always felt very supported by male coworkers. When she worked in a prototype factory, the men took the time to explain how the different machinery functioned to make sure she stayed safe — an extra step male colleagues weren’t granted.

Women tend to hire women more often than men, she says, so the more women pursue engineering, the more opportunities will open up to other women who follow in their footsteps.