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Reward, challenge draw women to construction

By DEBBIE WALTZER

A few years ago, when Gloria Ciminelli went to a construction site, she raised a few male eyebrows.

"But I handled it," the project director for the Pike Co. Inc. says. "I grew up with five brothers, so I'm used to being around men.

"You just have to establish the fact that you know what you're talking about, and then you earn people's respect. It's never been a real problem for me."

In fact, Ciminelli expects more women to join commercial construction, once a male-dominated industry.

Increasingly, women account for more top-level positions in commercial construction, according to data gathered by the National Association of Women in Construction, a group founded in 1953 by 16 women who worked in construction in the Fort Worth, Texas, area. A recent NAW-IC survey of its 5,500 members showed 45 percent of them hold managerial or administrative positions in the construction business. And that figure is bound to rise, Ciminelli predicts.

Early on in her life, Ciminelli had identified engineering or construction as possible career fields. With a bachelor's degree in environmental design from SUNY at Buffalo and a master's degree in architecture from California Polytechnic State University, Ciminelli spent the first eight years of her career working in campus planning and construction management for the University of California, Irvine.

"I discovered that I really enjoyed working in construction management because I had the chance to deal with every aspect of a project, from planning and design to construction," she says.

After eight years on the West Coast, the Buffalo native was ready to move closer to home and landed a job with Pike in 1994 as a project manager. She held that job until 1999, when the Pike Co. president and CEO Thomas Judson offered Ciminelli a chance to head up business development and marketing for the firm.

In that position, Ciminelli learned about an entirely different side of the business, from writing proposals to conceptualizing marketing strategies. She learned a



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

"What I love about the commercial construction business is the ability to see the end product," says Evelyn Hartwell, chief financial officer at LeCesse Construction Co.

lot in that role, Ciminelli says, but eagerly accepted a new opportunity at the Pike Co. this June. She was offered the chance to move up to the position of project director in the firm's Clifton Park office, right outside of Albany. Current projects at that office include a \$190 million renovation and new construction initiative for the Albany City School District and an \$18 million building addition to the historic Crandall Public Library.

Ciminelli, 48, now is one of six project directors at the 450-employee firm.

"In this position, it's critical to have an all-around background," she says.

Ciminelli admits she was not a great designer but says organizing pieces of a project is one of her strengths. And, the variety in her job is appealing.

"In the course of a day I could be providing a cost analysis, talking with a subcontractor about problems he's having get-

ting the right materials in on time or making sure that we have the right number of folks in the field to work on a particular project," Ciminelli says.

While she liked drumming up new business for the Pike Co. and brainstorming marketing ideas, Ciminelli is glad to be back in the construction trenches and out on job sites at least a few times a week.

"I missed this stuff when I was doing marketing," she says. "What I'm doing now is much more stimulating for me.

"But I'm flexible. I'll go wherever Pike needs me."

Evelyn Hartwell is another woman in commercial construction who is passionate about the commercial construction business, especially on the finance end.

The Allentown, Pa., native and Nazareth College of Rochester graduate—who earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from that institution—first worked in public accounting, then switched to private accounting with a few local firms, including Hansford Manufacturing Corp. and AAC Contracting Inc.

Intrigued by the construction segment, Hartwell then joined Christa Construction LLC as controller, later rising to the positions of vice president of finance and chief financial officer. In 2004, Hartwell joined LeCesse Construction Co. as CFO. She and two others complete the 70-employee firm's management team.

"What I love about the commercial construction business is the ability to see the end product," she says. "No, I don't look at every set of plans and specification sheets—but it's a real kick to drive by a building and say, 'Hey, we built that.'"

With projects ranging from the New York Wine & Culinary Center and the Apartment Homes at Cherry Ridge, a St. Ann's Community, to additions at Wells College and Alfred State College, working at LeCesse gives Hartwell the chance to "work with a variety of people."

"My job is to make sure that all of our processes in house help support the folks working in the field," says Hartwell, 44, who heads a team of seven direct reports.

In addition to advising the CEO on matters related to human resources, information technology and accounting, she works to ensure smooth operations "so that our

staff members out on job sites don't have to stop and wonder whether our subcontractors have been paid yet or not."

For Hartwell, her job is a rewarding one with a good work-life balance.

"And the best part is making sure that everyone has the tools they need to do what we do best—which is to build buildings," she says.

Like Hartwell, Michelle Paroda found her way into the construction industry via other paths. She previously held managerial positions in other industries, including long-term stints as vice president of operations for Frontier Corp., then Rochester Telephone Co., and as senior vice president for Choice One Communications Inc., now One Communications Inc.

But when Paroda's younger brother—Christopher Ramsey—approached her in 2002 about the idea of joining his construction firm that specialized in

bridge, water and sewer construction, she jumped at the chance. Paroda, who hails from Dansville and has an associate degree in mechanical engineering from Alfred State College, today serves as vice president of Ramsey Constructors Inc. The Livingston County company has 55 employees.

It is a big switch from once having overseen the work of 1,200 staff members, but Paroda could not be happier. She says the firm does interesting work—from constructing the roundabout at the corners of Routes 251 and 65, putting in the new bridge on Clay Road that connects Brighton-Henrietta Town Line Road and Jefferson Road, to bridge rehabilitation work in Scottsville and Cohocton.

Paroda, an Athena Award nominee and a Rochester Business Journal Forty Under 40 Award honoree, might have been a newcomer to the construction business when she teamed with her brother four

years ago, but that is no longer the case.

"I knew how to run a business, and a lot of skills are transportable when you come to a new industry," the 43-year-old says. "You just have to learn the details of that actual business, and Chris has been a wonderful coach for me."

Paroda makes it a point to go on site as often as possible. And while she is tremendously grateful for the opportunities while working for larger companies, Paroda relishes her current role.

"This is a refreshing environment in which to work," she says. "Chris and I are totally invested in this company—and we have a lot of skin in the game."

"More and more, I'm meeting other women in this industry, and I believe that opportunities for women to rise to the top in the construction field are increasing every day."

Debbie Waltzer is a Rochester-area freelance writer.