

# WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION: AWCI EDITION

Statistics compiled by the National Association of Women in Construction show that women numbered 10.9% of the entire U.S. construction workforce in 2022. As the old cigarette marketing campaign used to boast, "You've come a long way, baby!" But there is still a long way to go.

To find out where women stand and what they're thinking, we spoke with six female leaders (or emerging leaders) at contracting companies that are members of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industry. Before we hear what they have to say, meet our participants:



**Christine Boccia Executive Manager**  
JD Traditional Interiors - New York, NY  
*Running the business for 17 years*



**Veronica DeBonise President**  
G&G Plaster, EIFS & Drywall - Wareham, MA  
*President since 2016*



**Kim Galie President**  
Heartwood Building Group, Inc. - Philadelphia, PA  
*In the industry for 31 years*



**Kerri MacAlpine Office Manager / Acting Vice President**  
Mac-Lad Corp. - Calverton, NY  
*In the industry for 7 years*



**Sarah Nichols Director of Operations**  
Robert Aird, Inc. - Frederick, MD  
*With the company for 11 years*



**Megan Washnieski Director of Design & Engineering**  
South Valley Prefab - Denver, CO  
*In the industry for 25 years*

## How has the work environment for women in the industry changed since you began your career?

Washnieski: So much. Over the last 25 years, it doesn't look anything the same in a lot of ways, but at the same time, there are so many things that should have changed by now that probably haven't. On my last couple jobs where four out of the six people at the table that were major decision makers were women, which was a really cool experience, and that just simply wouldn't have happened when I first entered the industry. The flipside of it is the last job I worked on, there wasn't a single other woman at the table. So I think it's changing, but we've got a long way to go.

Galie: Dramatically, I would say. It's been a dramatic change, but I think all for the better. When I started I don't think there were many other project managers who were women at all. I think I knew of two others and I aspired to be them. They were these strong, powerful, really knowledgeable women who knew what they had, knew everything about their job—more than some of their counterparts. And

I think that that rings true to this day. You need to know, [like] anything in business, but I think as a woman, I feel like you should know what you're talking about in detail.

DeBonise: We talk about how general contractors are reaching out to us because they have to meet the quotas. I've seen that as a change—a lot of talk about diversity and inclusion that I didn't notice 10 years ago. But that being said, I was really engrossed in learning the business at that time and maybe not as exposed as I am now.

MacAlpine: We have female sales reps—we never had a female sales rep

ever, and she's my age too, so it's kind of cool. ... There are a few other women on Long Island whose dads have the business, so it's a similar vibe to what we're doing, and they're like, "You know what? We have to accommodate that." They would feel more comfortable talking to a woman. Let's bring a woman in. Let's see how that works. And so far, so good.

## Do you get tired of talking about women in construction?

Galie: No, I'm so proud of it. I'm proud to be a woman in construction. I try to tell younger generations that this is a great career opportunity for women and I'm super proud that my daughter has entered the business. She graduated with a degree in construction management and she's here in my office and hopefully she'll be the future.

Boccia: Never, never. I'm president of [New York's] Women Builders Council. One of our initiatives is we have an ambassador's council, and we mentor these younger women. We also gave them their own group so they can come together with positive and negative experiences and have a sounding board

### What is one piece of advice you would give to your younger self?

Megan Washnieski: Don't try to fit the mold. Change the mold. In order to be part of the boys club, you don't have to lose your femininity or do it the way the boys do it. You just have to make it better.

Today's Homeowner examined why so few women work in construction, and why more women aren't considering joining the field, and here are some of their main findings:



Women make up nearly 9% of construction managers, but only about 3% of construction trade workers.



The pay gap between female and male construction managers is roughly six percentage points smaller than the national average across all occupations (88.9% vs. 83.0%). The gap for construction trade workers is about 83.7%, or 0.7 percentage points better than the national average.

for each other, and they're women from many different companies. It's not just one company, and it's not just small companies. It's some of the biggest and most known companies in New York to some of the smaller ones.

MacAlpine: I do in a sense. I didn't feel it was important to talk about it. I'm really privileged to be in New York, which is a little bit more progressive with things like that. There is a lot more diversity in New York. I have learned pretty quickly that in other parts of the country that that's not the case. So diversity isn't really as appreciated. Going to the conferences and seeing how few women there are that actually have leadership roles in construction is really eye-opening. Even the AWCI Emerging Leaders group that I'm a part of, there are three women participating, which is great and awesome, but only three of us have leadership roles.

Men in the group were not ownership, they were employees of companies. And it was interesting to see that none of the other companies thought to send women to the meeting like that, to be a part of the emerging leader. Now, as the industry's changing and how the

### What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in the industry?

Kerri MacAlpine: My biggest advantage is that I can fly under the radar a lot because people don't assume that I am the boss or people don't assume that I'm the person that they're going to have to answer to at the end of the day or the person who's going to be making the big decisions, and now you can catch people a little bit more off guard. That's been a huge advantage for me.

workplaces are changing and how we need employees, we need workers, we need people to do this labor, this really skilled labor, encouraging women to get involved in that and say, "Hey, you can swing a hammer. You can learn all these skills. If that dude can do it, trust me, you can do it."

DeBonise: I love talking to women in construction. I don't find a whole lot of women in construction that necessarily have a similar role that I have, but they do parts of some of the things. I love to hear from them. But one thing I don't like talking about is when people will ask what I do. And I will say that my husband and I, we work together and own a construction company, and they automatically

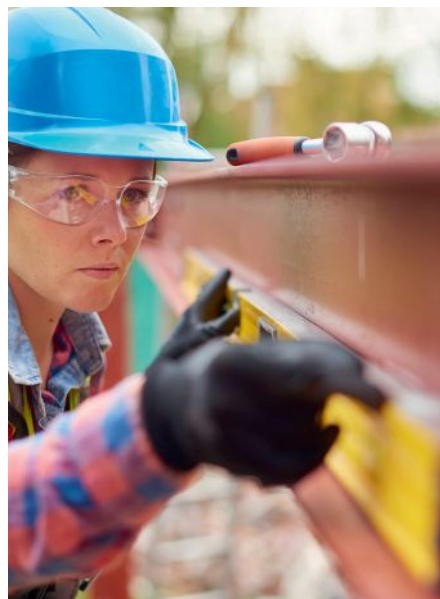
assume that I "do the books."

I used to defend that. I used to want them to know that, "No, I don't do the books. I do the books and I do the estimating and I do the project management and I do the technical side. I do the hiring, I do the firing. I do just everything." But if we talk for any length of time, it becomes obvious that I'm very involved and I know exactly what's going on in the company—my company.

Nichols: Never, never. I would never turn down an opportunity to promote and or tell any woman. Don't be afraid. Try it. You might find it intriguing, you might not like it, but you never know. It's kind of like I did. Dip your toe in. See what happens. I mean, there



Across construction trade jobs, women are most represented in the occupations of painters and paperhangers (10.2%) along with construction and building inspectors (8.0%).



Seven of the 10 states with the highest percentages of female construction trade workers are in the South.



Fewer than one in 100 construction trade workers are women in two states, namely, Delaware and South Dakota.

are just so many different areas and capacities of where you could be within the industry as a whole that you might find an area you like.

Washnieski: Yes. Yes, I do. When I first started in this industry, the reason that I didn't like talking about women in construction is because I didn't like the qualifier that came with it. When I was in school, I didn't want to be the best female student, I wanted to be valedictorian. And so I approached my career the same way. The second part of it is that I never have found much sense in expecting people to treat you the same when you're continually telling them how different you are. As I've gotten a little bit older, though, my feelings on that have changed, primarily because I have two teenage girls who are becoming women really quickly, and I realize that it's important we talk about it, but how we talk about it is even more important.

Women in construction, at least in my experience, has become synonymous with celebrating the fact that a woman works for a construction company regardless of what her role is or how successful she is in it. And that's not the message to be sending, I don't feel. When they started the National Association of Women in Construction in the 1950s, I don't think that's what they meant. Seventy years later, I think we really need to be talking about it from the standpoint of how we invite and encourage women into a labor market based on the fact that we are just flat missing out on a large, very talented labor pool right now in a labor-stretched market.

### **What is something you find challenging about your work?**

washnieski: The challenges are the same thing as what is the most rewarding part of doing this work, and that's really just the changing atmosphere. At any given time, the buildings we work on change, the code changes, the technology changes, the people you work with change, the labor market

### **How do you break free from stereotypes?**

Christine Boccia: You have to know your stuff. You can't go out there and just be a pretty face or somebody who smiles and gets in somewhere. You really have to know what you're talking about. You have to know how to be one of the guys at times. You have to know when to put them in their place and gain that respect.

changes, and so all those changes keep it interesting and keep you on your toes, but it can definitely create some challenges along the way.

MacAlpine: I had to learn a lot of things by being in the fire and figuring out how do I get out of this? How do I figure this out? Again, who do I need? What do I need? Where am I at? I had to ask for a lot of help and that was challenging for me at first because especially as a woman, you assume that people are going to think you don't know what you're talking about. So it was really hard for me to overcome that, acknowledging that yes, I don't know what I'm talking about and yes, that's OK and I will know what I'm talking about one day.

Nichols: I think personally for me, the biggest challenge right now is our worker shortage, finding enough work for our employees and employees for the work. So as soon as we have

good weather, we have several large contracts that were postponed due to the pandemic, and they're all looking to release at one time. Currently we don't have enough men to fulfill that requirement, so we're actively hiring and pursuing skilled labor.

Boccia: One of the most challenging and yet satisfying is being a woman in the New York construction industry and gaining the respect of the contractors in New York City. I work day to day with my team every day, and when you're out there and people see that you are a worker, you believe in what you do, you know what you do, you gain that respect, which is hugely gratifying.

### **What has been the most memorable moment working in construction?**

Washnieski: The day I decided it'd be a good idea to climb the tower crane and see what that was like and decided never to do that again. Then there's the Saturday that we had crews working and I wanted to go understand the process better ... and also support them because they were working on Saturday. But I also had little kids at the time ... and I didn't want to miss out on time with them. So I took them with me and they helped brick a panel for the afternoon, and that's been a fun memory.

Galie: Probably a project we finished a few years ago that was a collaboration of my dad before he retired, my brother and myself on the project management side. We built a building for a university that's right down the road ... and we did all of the carpentry-related items to that from outside to inside. So it's

### **What is one piece of advice you would give to your younger self?**

Kerri MacAlpine: My biggest piece of advice is that I should have really paid attention and tried harder in my Spanish classes because that is a huge asset right now in construction. I took Spanish and I studied abroad in a Spanish-speaking country, but even that is not enough for me to feel comfortable speaking colloquial Spanish.




Sarah Nicols

something I see all the time and I know that my dad and I and my brother were instrumental in building it, so that's kind of cool.

MacAlpine: We had to create a quote book in my office because of all of the insane things that people say to us throughout the day. I can flip through that and I can just laugh because I remember that exact situation we were in. My serious memorable moment was we had a flood in our office—disaster fiasco. So I had to create an impromptu office in our warehouse. I took all of the equipment and put it into our warehouse, and my dad, the boss, was on vacation and had no idea. I did not tell him.

We're going to do impromptu office, we're going to rewire everything in the warehouse. And it was I think November. So we were in our coats and bundled up and it was ridiculous.



**What do you hope others see in you when you are doing your job at your best?**

Veronica DeBonise: I hope that others see an honest, hardworking person and woman. But person first, because there's a lot of talk about men and women in roles and in different things, but I really feel like we all have kind of the same capabilities, but different percentages. Using each other's strengths rather than focus on what the other one can't do, I think, is how we come together for the best product that we can.

And when he came back and he saw the whole situation and I told him about the flood, he freaked out and then he calmed down and was like, "You know what? I'm really proud of you. You did a really good job at figuring that situation out, and I trust that you would be able to run this business." So that was my most memorable serious moment.

Boccia: Closing my first big contract. I worked for my father for many years, but more on the administrative side. I never got into the weeds of the actual running of the company until after he passed away. Then it was somewhat of a learning curve, but that first contract that I dove into, negotiated back and forth terms, conditions, and actually closing it. It was a multimillion-dollar contract. And I will never forget, I almost actually screamed. I was so happy.

**What makes you proud to work**

### in the construction industry?

MacAlpine: My favorite part is to be able to help build my community so we can drive down the road in our town and be able to point out all of the places that my brother, my dad, my uncle, members of our family have all put material into, have all participated in building and seeing all of the efforts that go toward that and seeing the full impact that everyone's efforts have, even seemingly small, in going into the completion of a project.

Galie: I'm proud to watched Philadelphia's whole skyline, especially University City, really change over my tenure here. We have created some state-of-the-art hospitals and facilities in the city of Philadelphia that are world renowned.

Washnieski: It's an industry that supports people from diverse backgrounds from all over and allows them an ability to succeed and advance regardless of what walk of life they come from.

DeBonise: I'm proud that I'm doing something that is outside of what people expect, of what even I would have expected from myself, say, 20 years ago. Just even owning my own company, I don't feel like it was something that I had even thought about. It was just kind of like, go get a job and work here or work there, not create a job for others. So I'm kind of proud of that.

Nichols: What makes me the most proud is that the industry is constantly evolving. The thing that I find most fascinating is that the manufacturers come up with different technology. It's just incredible. The systems continue to advance and the cladding options are becoming almost endless. But I would say the proudest moment is after you've worked on a job and you've brought that project to fruition, and years later you are driving around with family and friends in the car and all of a sudden you can say, "Hey, look over there. We did that building 10 years



Megan Washnieski and daughters on the job

ago and look how beautiful it still is." So that's a great moment, not just for me and family and friends, but also our entire company as well.

Boccia: I was brought up to believe in pride of ownership. If you are going to do something, try to do it the best that you possibly can and be proud of it. So I need to put the work in to be the best that I can. I need to incorporate what I do to run JD Traditional and push that pride of ownership right down

through to all the other employees who work for me.

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*AWCI Education Program Manager Thao Nguyen conducted interviews with nine female AWCI contractors in January and February. Due to space requirements, abbreviated versions of the interviews with six of those nine women are included in this article. Go to AWCI's YouTube channel, [www.youtube.com/user/AWCImedia](http://www.youtube.com/user/AWCImedia), to view the all the interviews in their entirety.*

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