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Working Hard to Open Industry Doors for FUTURE GENERATIONS

By Dawn M. Barker, PrairieVisions Design Ltd.

ONLY A FEW decades back, the number of 'hats' a woman could wear were limited, in terms of career options. Today, there are far more choices, including hard hats. More and more, women are pursuing careers in construction, and encouraging others to follow in their footsteps.

One such extraordinary woman is Linda Seibel of Anderson Steel Supply Inc. Linda has a 34 year history in the construction association as an estimator and project manager, in the electrical and hardware areas. It wasn't a childhood dream of hers to become a construction worker, but when she applied for an estimator position, she found it fit her interests and personality perfectly.

It was different back when I started," Linda recalled. "If somebody called in and needed an answer on a project, even though I'd done the estimating, drawing and knew the project inside and out, they would sometimes ask for 'the man in charge'. Finally, one day the person on the other end asked for 'the man in charge', and I knew that if I didn't become that 'man', I would never get any respect in the industry, so I informed him that I was in charge

and could, and would, answer his questions."

The need for that assertiveness is echoed by Katie Hanning, assistant project manager at Pierce Flooring in Great Falls. Originally having been employed in reception, Katie worked her way up to her current job, where she supervises flooring installation in large commercial projects.

"The number one thing I hear as president of the Women In Construction's Montana Chapter is that every time you go out onto a jobsite, even if you've been doing the job for many years, you have to start all over again proving yourself and your capabilities," Katie said.

The need to find properly fitting personal protective equipment for female workers on the job site has also been a difficulty cited by many women in the field. Charlotte Vanderziel of Prairie Kraft Specialties in Great Falls works in the construction industry as a sales manager. Having grown up in a rural setting, Charlotte said, working in an outdoor-type industry appealed to her.

"I like dealing with people in construction," Charlotte said. "I've worked in com-

panies where I dealt mostly with white collar workers, and it just didn't appeal to me the same way. Construction workers are a different kind of people. They're easier to work with, and I thoroughly enjoy it."

Her only regret is that early in her career, she didn't pursue a different stream of construction, instead of working in the industry in administration. "I kind of wish I had pushed a little harder to get out of the office, out to the sites," she said.

When asked why she chose this field, Katie answered, "Construction is where all the cool people get to play. In construction, you're working with people from all the different trades. It's what I enjoy the most."

Charlotte said she feels that women have a tendency to be more detail oriented than men in the industry, and that she has been told that women in general aren't as hard on company equipment as their male counterparts.

Katie cited women's attentiveness to their environment as one of the advantages women bring to the jobsite.

"We tend to look at potential risks and



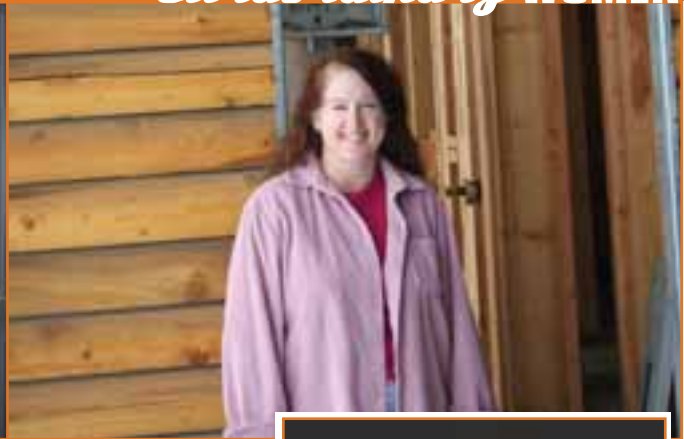
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Clockwise from top left: Linda Seibel, Charlotte Vandereil and Katie Hanning.



dangers differently than men do," she said. "Also, women can multitask, which is a real asset to companies."

In any case, seeing things from both female and male perspectives is a benefit. "It's always good to have differing points of view, in any industry," Linda added.

Linda is the president of the Great Falls Construction project, in which teams are sponsored to envision and build a creation out of food cans, which are then given to the local community food bank. Last year's inaugural event was sponsored by the National Association of Women In Construction (NAWIC). Eight teams generated more than 13,000 pounds of donations.

"Some of these creations were quite elaborate," Linda enthused. "They cost anywhere between \$500 and \$2000 to make."

In addition, Linda is past president of Cascade, Inc., a group which advocates for the preservation of heritage properties in the Great Falls area, and she works with a "Block Kids" program which supports construction as a positive career choice. One of the Block Kids challenges involves building something using 100 interlocking blocks, a rock, a piece of string, and a square of tinfoil, given a 45 minute timeline. Block Kids also has a video for youth which shows that many interests, such as drawing, computers, or design have applications in construction, and encourages them to consider joining the second largest employment field in the country.

"The Montana Construction Associa-

tion has always been supportive of women in construction," Linda said. "They see women as nurturers, and that's what we add to the industry, whether it's projects like Canstruction or Block Kids education programs - we're enhancing the public image of the construction industry, and drawing people of both sexes to it."

Katie serves on the education committee of the MCA. "The construction industry as a whole is trying really hard to integrate women into the trades," she said. "A lot of women, and men for that matter, don't seriously consider this as a career. It's not something that high school counselors recommend or think of as an option. They'd rather have kids go to university, but they might not realize that it's a very good opportunity. There are retirement programs, insurance, and other valuable career opportunities out there."

According to the women, personal attributes valuable to the construction field include being a self-starter, a hard

worker, being accountable for your actions, and being detail oriented.

"I'd definitely recommend the construction industry to any young person, whether they're male or female," Charlotte said.

"It's a wonderful feeling," Linda said. "You're part of building a project, and when it's complete, whatever part of it you were involved with, it's like a bit of the building becomes part of you. You contributed to the finished project." □

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