

NAWIC **TODAY**

The National Association of
Women in Construction

SEPT/OCT 2020

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65TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE RECAP

**Highlights from our
FIRST EVER Virtual
Conference!**

ALIGNING PERSONAL PURPOSE WITH WORK

**The intersection of
work, passion, and
personal experience.**

NOTE TO MY YOUNGER SELF:

**Never discount your
experiences along
the way!**



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Introducing your 2020-2021
NAWIC President

Note to My Younger Self: Never Discount Your Experiences Along the Way

By Debra Hilmerson, President and CEO, Hilmerson Safety

I am often asked how I got where I am in the construction industry today and whether I had it rough because I am female. I believe that everything we experience prepares us for what's next. You build a life just as you might construct a building, so pay attention to whatever is going on in your life right now - it's happening for a reason.

I was one of the few women in commercial construction when I started my career some 30 years ago, but I was lucky. I didn't have a difficult time because of my gender. I was a tomboy and a tough, hard worker. I had two older brothers, an older sister, and a younger sister. My dad owned a junkyard, and we all had to pull our weight. Growing up in that kind of environment - driving front-end loaders and crushing cars at 10 years old - gave me confidence in myself.



I started my career as a construction laborer setting precast concrete. While I didn't have it bad, I did have to prove myself. I was determined that no one was going to get in my way or say I wasn't capable of performing a job. They didn't give me the easy jobs, but they also didn't set me up for failure by giving me the most difficult ones. Once I got into the groove, I knew I was working with people who wanted me to be successful, and I call them my brothers to this day. We're still friends. In fact, we all reconnected earlier this summer.

Looking back, did I want to be standing in -35-degree temperatures, thinking this was the greatest career on earth? No. But you take the good stuff with the more challenging, and I stayed because I loved the camaraderie. I stayed because, when it was 75 and sunny, I was happy to be outside.

I don't think I would do anything differently. I've been fortunate that everything has fallen into place. Every step of the way was the right step, and I knew there was a lot more ahead.

How cool would it be to own a construction company!

I discovered my passion for safety after being asked to represent my employer at a monthly joint labor/OSHA safety meeting during the construction of the Mall of America. After leaving the trades, I went to work as Safety Director on a \$220M wastewater treatment plant in Seattle.

It was there that I encountered a woman-owned and operated crane business. I had never known of a construction company owned and run by a female, and I thought it was really cool. Maybe I should buy some heavy equipment and rent it out! I obviously didn't do that, but the idea of owning a business stuck with me.



In 2001, I became an independent safety consultant. Then in 2017, after years of consistently seeing fall protection as the number one cause of fatalities and serious injuries, I shifted my attention to creating better equipment and solutions. I'm proud that our first two products, Hilmerson Safety Rail System and Hilmerson Barrier Fence Systems, are considered to be the future of our industry.

I didn't do all this alone. The kudos belong to the construction industry leaders and workers who told me they wanted safer, easier to use, and more sustainable safety equipment that would also deliver a good ROI. They spoke. We listened. And we invested big money in our products to make sure they worked.

If I had started Hilmerson Safety 10 years earlier, I may not have had enough street cred or time in the trenches learning and seeing the challenges. I wouldn't have been able to call people I'd met along the way, who are still actively working in the field, dealing with the problems daily, and ask for their free R&D advice. I'm glad I got into management and learned how to motivate change. Everything that happened prior to 2017 prepared me for the opportunity of starting my own product development company.

Do I consider myself a visionary? Yes, in terms of my space. With my experience, I can see where the industry needs to go, especially with respect to safety and security. Perhaps most importantly, I listen. The concept for our barrier fences came out of a conversation with a superintendent. We're all challenged with the same problems. If this person is having this issue, you can bet others are too.

I've observed very few safety problems for which solutions already exist, even though we've had the same problems for years. This is why I'm determined to create solutions. I have a passion for this business and for making sure people go home safely at the end of the day. I want to create products that make lives easier, more efficient, and more profitable. I care about people and their successes.

Today, there are more women in construction than ever. Looking back at my own journey, I can see that opportunities are created in this industry because women have earned them and deserve them.

More opportunities are out there for women

While there are more opportunities for women, understand that it doesn't mean you're going to get a free ride. If you're going to be in the trades, don't walk through the job site wearing high heels – be prepared to work. Construction is rough. It's tough. It's fast paced. There's change daily – but when you push yourself, you'll go home every day feeling like you've accomplished something.

Male or female, you must learn to stand up for yourself without being combative. There will be people who don't like you, regardless of your gender. If you are still with the same company in the trades after five years, you're doing well.

Some women also have a tendency to put restrictions on themselves. Don't get in your own way by thinking that just because you've never done something you can't do it. Also, don't assume that because you're a woman, nobody wants to hear from you. Know your subject, speak with confidence, and make your goal clear – that you aim to make jobs better, easier, faster or safer – and odds are others will listen.

There's a lot of talk about diversity, equity and inclusion in today's world. So, let me conclude by putting this out there: To continue amplifying our voices in the industry, we need more men at women's construction events. We're in a male-dominated industry – we need to understand their perspectives, and we need them to hear ours. We need men showing up at our meetings and actively participating in our associations, chapters and events. With this type of inclusion, we could exponentially grow diversity.

Deb Hilmerson, President & CEO, Hilmerson Safety

Changing a mindset takes a mountain of grit, something that describes Deb Hilmerson perfectly, from her hard hat to her steel toe boots. Her 30 years in construction as a field laborer, safety director and consultant landed her in the right place at the right time to transform archaic equipment practices on construction sites.