



Every Experience Prepares You for What's Next

DEB HILMERSON CEO, Hilmerson Safety

Anyone who knew Deb Hilmerson as she was growing up in Little Falls, Minnesota, would likely not be surprised by her career path. Her father owned a salvage yard where she learned how to get her hands dirty at an early age. "I loved being with my dad and at an early age, I was removing car parts, crushing cars, driving front-end loaders and more."

As captain of the University of Minnesota women's basketball team, Hilmerson cultivated strong leadership and team-building skills that gave her the fortitude to challenge construction norms later in life.

Her career began as a union construction worker and later included roles as a safety director and consultant working at large companies across the country. Very few safety consultants have field experience in the trenches, but Hilmerson did. "As a safety inspector questioning practices and equipment that had not prevented accidents, I grew weary of repeatedly hearing, 'This is how we do it.' I decided that was not good enough and I knew I could do better; our industry could do better."

In 2001, she took her experience and knowledge base, combined with a drive to do things differently, and started Hilmerson Safety. Since that time, she has developed six patented construction safety products used on some of the largest construction sites in the U.S. Hilmerson's reusable products impact the environment and workers' lives in positive ways while controlling labor and construction costs.

Hilmerson says working in construction was challenging at first because there were very few women. "I had to prove myself and let them know I didn't want to wear the pink hard hat and hold the stop sign. I wanted to be physically involved and do exactly what the guys did, without special treatment. Once I proved I could hold my own, most of the guys onsite became my friends and brothers. My gender has never stopped me from



moving forward in my career."

Even today, Hilmerson says there are still a relatively small number of women working in trades, particularly in senior leadership positions. "I am seeing more construction companies employing women, and I love it, but we're still not even close to being where we should be. There's great opportunity in the trades and a wide variety of positions available. Don't let fear or anything else hold you back. Educate yourself and find a mentor. Many of the women who have been in the field are more than happy to help someone younger navigate and find their way in this industry. LinkedIn and other social media platforms are great places to start. And of course, my advice to anyone starting a career would be work harder, work smarter, show up early, prove yourself, be willing to listen and to learn, ask questions and participate."

Hilmerson has much to be proud of; her company has been fortunate to participate in multiple iconic projects. "There are times you forget how far you've come and I think it's important to stop and recognize that. As a student athlete at the University of Minnesota back in the 1980s, I vividly recall cutting through the Engineering School to get to basketball practice. I'd see all those really smart people, and think I wasn't smart enough to be in those classrooms. Today, I own a company that designs, engineers and sells construction safety products. When I returned to campus not long ago, it felt surreal to see products I created, with my name and logo on them, in use on two big projects, including an extensive renovation at the College of Science and Engineering. Talk about a full-circle moment!"

She adds, "I believe 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."