



## More women working in construction

By: Molly M. Fleming The Journal Record February 1, 2019 0



Heather Rouba, project manager with CMSWillowbrook, stands over a trench where old plumbing and infrastructure has been removed inside the former Dunbar Elementary School at 1432 NE Seventh St. in Oklahoma City. (Photos by Mark Hancock)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Former Mrs. Oklahoma Heather Rouba has joined a growing group of women working in construction.

Rouba works with CMSWillowbrook and is overseeing the Dunbar Commons historic restoration project.

Rouba started out in interior design. In 2017, when she went to get her master's degree after having three children, she immediately enrolled in the University of Oklahoma's structural management degree program. She started classes that

afternoon.

She joined CMSWillowbrook in March 2018. She said she thinks women can help increase communication in the male-dominated industry.

"Women have a natural skill for multi-tasking and communicating," she said.

At CMS, women account for 18 percent of the employees, which is above the national average for women in the construction industry.

Nationwide, there are more than 11 million people in construction, but only 10 percent are women, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2018 Current Population Survey.

CMS President Weston DeHart grew up visiting construction sites with his dad and company founder, Cary DeHart. Weston DeHart said he didn't see a lot of women on those job sites.

In 2010, about 800,000 women were in the industry. Now, it's 1.1 million, according to the 2018 population survey from BLS.

DeHart said women are better at personal skills and developing relationships than men, which is important in the industry. He said after other companies have worked with the women at CMS, they're often motivated to bring females on to their team.

Vice President of Pre-Construction Cristy Callins was hired by then-President Cary DeHart. He's now CEO.

"Even though it's a male-dominated industry, from day one I've never felt like I was in that," she said. "Cary set that foundation and gave us the respect and tools so we could go any direction we wanted to go."

Deemah Ramadan is helping other women go any direction they desire as well, even if it means leaving her company, DBG Construction. She started DBG in 2007 and hired women who didn't have construction experience. They've now gone on to work for other firms.

"I could probably name nine or 10 women that their very first job in commercial construction was with us," she said.

Ramadan said she has endured some tough days being the only female on the job site. When she was in residential construction, she wouldn't have subcontractors show up to the job site. But her business partner, Frey Radfar, would call and they'd come to the site. That's when they'd learn she was in charge.

As a Middle Eastern woman, she's also been called a terrorist.

"No matter the challenges I face, I look back and say, 'I love what I'm doing,'" she said. "The challenge you might face at that moment in time presently – it disappears."

She said women can bring a much more detailed perspective to the job site than their male counterparts.

Andrea Gossard, Manhattan Construction's senior project manager at the Oklahoma state Capitol, echoed Ramadan's sentiment. She said men often see a project from the 30,000-foot view, but both perspectives are important.



Rouba oversees the renovation in progress inside the former school building.

Manhattan also exceeds the national average, with 12 percent of its workforce being women.

Gossard's colleague Lucy Lambert Novotny has been with Manhattan for 10 years, but she started in Dallas, where she was often referred to as sweetheart or honey. Because of that experience, she learned to use different tones when speaking and even to sit in a chair with a more powerful stance.

"If I'm the one leading the meeting, I sit at the head of the table and bring the chair up as high as it will go, and I lean into the table so I look as powerful as possible," she said.

Timberlake Construction Vice President of Preconstruction Lani O'Reidy also has an interior design background. She said she thinks women have a better sense of organization than their male colleagues. Women have a different way of building relationships with the subcontractors and the building owners, she said.

But she said everyone at the project table offers an important perspective. There's also a strong respect between women in the industry.

"I hope women feel welcomed into the industry, especially in the future," she said. "I would hate for it to be a career path that wasn't considered."

Most of the women at the firms are involved in helping to get other females in the industry, such as helping with Associated General Contractors: Oklahoma Chapter's work with Junior Achievement or volunteering with Francis Tuttle Technology Center's Girl Tech program.

AGC of America has launched a diversity and inclusion effort to make sure the industry better reflects the population, said Brian Turmail, vice president of public affairs and strategic initiatives.

"This is especially important because we can't afford to have half of the U.S. population so significantly underrepresented in the construction industry at a time when nearly 80 percent of contractors report they are having a hard time finding qualified workers to hire," he said via email.

Editor's Note: This story was updated on Feb. 4.

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