

# Women make headway in construction during down economy

By JAMES PALEN  
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More than a half-century beyond the introduction of Rosie the Riveter to the world, the faces of construction are more diverse, with women now taking active roles in the trade.

But in a down economy that has increased the depth of the construction unemployment pool, how are women faring in an environment more competitive than what was seen just a few years ago? Are women struggling to land those positions that are open?

"Absolutely not," said Kenneth Walsh, San Diego State University professor and director of SDSU's J.R. Filanc Construction Engineering and Management Program. "It's all about capabilities."

In Walsh's experience, recent trends show that women studying construction and engineering not only have a fair shot at landing a job after school, but a fair shot at doing so before their male counterparts as well.

"The women amongst our graduates who have finished were hired no slower, and probably a little faster, than men by and large. They're definitely not facing any resist-

ance," Walsh said.

It is a different story from that of the past, when Walsh recalls only about 5 percent of construction students being women. Today, he estimates women make up about 20 percent of his classes.

That increase, as well as the acceptance of women in the field, is something Walsh contributes to organizations like the San Diego chapter of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), as well as the Association of General Contractors' San Diego chapter, which is headed by a woman — Diane Keltner of **Synergy Electric Company Inc.**

"It just seems to be kind of building more traction amongst young women as a potential career path," Walsh said. "I've been teaching now for 16 years and if I look back at the beginning, the classes were just overwhelmingly male."

Lorelee Langworthy, president of the San Diego chapter of NAWIC, said awareness has been key, adding that the downturn in the economy may have actually opened doors for women.

"When it was mostly (private sector work) there wasn't

the added incentive to hire a woman-owned business," Langworthy said.

With federal stimulus money funding many of the projects now breaking ground, Langworthy said the ratio of women to men in a given work force has become a larger factor in who gets the contracts as well.

"The contracts that are being awarded, they are military, they are schools," Langworthy said. "Then we're seeing biotech, but we're moving away from private, where, in that market, it didn't really factor in whether you're a woman-owned business."

NAWIC is actively involved in programs geared toward introducing teen girls to construction, such as MAGIC, or Mentor A Girl In Construction. Around 70 high school girls have graduated from the summer program during the past three years.

In general, Walsh believes jobs are being filled by women because women are becoming more available at a time when acceptance is becoming more common.

"The construction industry, which, there's no question, is a little bit traditional and maybe a little bit height-bound, at least in perception,

is aging," Walsh said. "So we've got a lot of young people coming into the industry now who maybe don't carry some of those stereotypes."

The trend isn't starting in college, though. The Stanley E. Foster Construction Technology Academy, a vocational school at the Kearny High Educational Complex, caters to both high school boys and girls. In the last year alone, the school's female enrollment has gone from 22 percent to 24 percent. Of the 449 current students, 109 are girls.

That increased interest has worked its way into college, where Walsh believes the overall decreasing gender gap could be making a difference as well. Larger proportions of women graduating from college means more women in the construction industry's client base as professionals.

By hiring women, construction companies are going to communicate better with the client base "to the extent that you can find ways to reflect them," Walsh said. "So I just think there's growing acceptance — a kind of growing gender neutrality — among the industry."

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