Breaking new ground: 
Special women in construction issue

At John Deere, we believe that when we improve the diversity of our workforce, we all benefit. Diverse perspectives bring fresh ideas and inform better decisions while strengthening connections to local communities and the world around us. It’s a competitive advantage. Opening the doors to a broader mix of talent through diversity and an inclusive culture is vital to our growth and innovation.

In this special double issue of The Dirt and Worksite Journal, we celebrate the growing and extremely important role women are playing in the construction industry. Today more women than ever before are joining the industry, although it remains a male-dominated field. Women represent 10 percent of the construction industry in the United States, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. By comparison, women make up 47 percent of the total U.S. workforce. But job opportunities for women in the construction field are on the rise, reports the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC).

The gender pay gap in construction is significantly smaller than in other industries. In the U.S., women earn an average of 88.1 percent of what men make, but in the construction industry, women earn an average of 99.1 percent of what men make, according to the NAWIC. And many women are breaking the glass ceiling. One in three companies has promoted women to senior roles, and in recent years the number of women-owned construction firms has grown 64 percent. Today 13 percent of construction firms are owned by women.*

As you’ll learn in the stories in this issue, women are thriving in many roles including owner, CEO, CFO, office manager, estimating manager, maintenance supervisor, and machine operator. These women love their jobs and are passionate about the industry. They believe women have an important role in construction and that more are needed. According to a female CFO we interviewed, there is a place for everyone to make an impact by sharing their unique talents and perspectives. Or as one of the female operators we spoke with succinctly put it: “We are strong. And we belong.”

*Sources: BigRentz.com.

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COVER STORY
IN SWIFT SUCCESSION
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The long-term plan for this successful construction company has been built with its female leadership team and employees.

TOGETHER WE SHINE | PAGE 8
A dedicated trio of female equipment operators has proven its worth on a wide range of jobsites and in the construction industry.
The demand for construction work is strong, and you’re running hard to keep up. As your trusted financial provider, John Deere Financial is here to support you. Whether you need new or used equipment or parts and service, we offer flexible financing options and the latest digital tools for you to manage your account anytime, anywhere — including the MyFinancial app.

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“It started with a business card and a pickup truck,” says Jim Russell, founder and CEO of Russell of Davenport, Iowa. “It was the middle of a recession, so the only way was up.” And upward he went, and continues to go, in large part due to the female talent making up over 30 percent of the company’s team.

With women at every level of the company — from boots on the ground through the C-suite — Russell is well ahead of the curve when it comes to leveraging the skill set females often bring to the table. “It was short-lived, but my first ‘hire’ was my mom. She helped with some administrative items early on but was really the inspiration. She set a great example of what a strong, intelligent, and hardworking person looks like. Seeing that spirit live on through our team is very rewarding.”

In its 38 years, Russell has been no stranger to female leadership — which is exactly what’s taking the company to the next level.

FOLLOWING SUIT
Taking the helm going forward is Jim’s daughter and the company’s new president, Caitlin Russell, who’s been part of the team as long as she can remember. “Jim used to bring my siblings and me in on Saturdays and we’d check the phone lines,” Caitlin jokes. “That obviously was just to keep us busy, but we really learned by the example he set — how much he cared and how hard he worked to make this successful.”

— continued
We took so much pride in visiting different jobsites and seeing the impact the company was having on our community. I couldn’t wait to join the team.”

Caitlin gained additional exposure by performing administrative functions while in high school before attending Arizona State University to get her degree in construction management. She then rejoined the company as a project engineer, quickly working her way up the ranks; earning her MBA, Iowa Real Estate Broker license, and Certified Commercial Investment Manager designation; and pioneering the real estate arm of the firm, all while raising a family. At the time of this interview, she is just seven weeks out from the birth of her fourth child and already itching to get back in the saddle.

“Growing with the business and being the boss’s daughter added an extra weight of expectation,” Caitlin admits. And in expected fashion for someone so high achieving, she promptly adds, “but also some fun, too. You get exposed to some things earlier and you work harder for them, so I’ve appreciated all this time under Jim’s wing. He’s really taught me the importance of collaborating with the team, and I have an immense amount of appreciation for our people.”

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS
Another working mother following Caitlin’s ambitious example is Project Manager Erin Marsh. She hasn’t been with the company as long but displays the same grit and pride in her work that’s representative of the Russell legacy. “I got into the trade almost by accident,” Marsh explains. “I picked up an admin job on a worksite to help pay for school. My manager asked why I didn’t just take the classes to make it official because I was already doing the job anyway. So, I finished my construction engineering program and eventually landed at Russell a couple years ago.”

For Marsh, the reality of working for Russell has exceeded expectations. “I love it. Russell has been tremendous for me and my family. As a mom, the work-life balance has been critical to my success — I’ve never had to sacrifice one or the other, and I feel very appreciated.” For the types of work Marsh takes on, who wouldn’t appreciate her? Her current project is on the national stage — the new Stanley Art Museum for the University of Iowa, which will be home to an estimated $500M in one-of-a-kind pieces. “It’s an incredibly unique building, both in design and materials used. At the end of the day, turning over the key to the owner is the best part of my job. Sharing in their excitement is gratifying.”

LEADING BY EXAMPLE
Another Russell team member excited to play her part is Apprentice Carpenter Cathy Snell, who is arguably the most outgoing and upbeat person to ever grace a jobsite. After exploring various career options, she’s found her true calling in carpentry. “I picked it up as a way to stay busy during the pandemic,” Snell shares her story. “I just realized I had so much love and passion for being creative, building things, and making things that make me proud. An old boss asked if I ever considered the trades, and as a woman I didn’t see...”
it as a possibility. Now that I’m here, I couldn’t be happier. Everyone has been so welcoming and supportive of my growth.”

Snell’s positivity and its benefits extend beyond the jobsite. “I love the example this sets for my kids. I’m a single mother, so sharing the skills I’ve learned with them and just the attitude of not being afraid to figure something out means a lot. My little one loves it, too — she loves every second of building something with me, and making those memories means the world.”

In addition to the overwhelming depth of female talent at Russell, something else is clear. No one is showing up just because they have to. The entire team is there to bring their best, take on new challenges, and be leaders in all aspects of their lives. “Our culture is all about growth,” says Caitlin. “If you’re passionate about that, we’re passionate about you.”

Russell is serviced by Martin Equipment, Rock Island, Illinois.

Michelle Solis Russell
owner, Solis Russell Owner Services

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Complementing the team at Russell of Davenport, Iowa, is Michelle Solis Russell, both life and business partner to the company’s founder, Jim Russell. In addition to running facilities management and working with leadership to develop mentorship and career tracks for the team, Solis Russell also owns and operates her own company, Solis Russell Owner Services (SROS).

A Minority- and Woman-Owned Business Enterprise, SROS assists project owners through the entirety of the construction process, starting long before ground is broken. “We’re typically involved in projects from their initial ideation and work to untangle the knots and align the teams and resources to make it all happen,” Solis Russell explains. “That includes everything from securing federal and private funding options to writing RFPs, engaging architects, awarding bids, and ensuring everything is as effortless as possible for our clients.”

Check out the video at: JohnDeere.com/TheDirt
Together we

These experienced female operators live in a material world — and love it

– continued
To complete these projects, Pierce Builders runs a huge fleet of John Deere machines, including wheel loaders, excavators, dozers, and articulated dump trucks (ADTs). “Because we do every phase of the job, we need equipment ranging from small to large,” says Hal Pierce, president. “We own every size Deere loader except the 944K.”

“WE BELONG”
Operator Erin McFague runs the Deere 844L Wheel Loader, which she and her female coworkers have dubbed “The Material Girl.” “That’s mainly what we use her for — material work,” she says. “I love everything about this machine — the joystick control and the spacious cab. It has crazy amounts of power,

. . . WHEN THEY LEARN I HAVE A FEMALE BOSS AND FEMALE COWORKERS, THAT’S THE REAL SHOCK-AND-AWE FACTOR.”
— ERIN McFAGUE, OPERATOR, PIERCE BUILDERS

mass earthmoving on a massive scale. On a recently completed project, Pierce Builders, Granby, Connecticut, moved one million yards. For the current Amazon Fulfillment Center they are working on — the company’s seventh such project — they’ve moved over half-a-million yards. In addition to mass earthwork, the company also performs water/sewer pipework and utility work.
easily outperforming any of the larger machines we have. With the L-Series, Deere really stepped it up.”

McFague typically starts her day at 6 a.m. “What gets me through long days is coffee, number one,” she says, “and a comfortable machine. As long as you have coffee and comfort, you’re going to have a good day, am I right (laughs)? I’m lucky to work for a company that provides newer machines that are kept up really well.”

McFague began working for Pierce Builders eight years ago after working as a bartender for ten years. “They were looking for someone to work in the scale house. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. None. Zero. Never worked in construction or on big machines.”

Pierce’s wife Alescia showed her how to run a loader and ADT. “She told me, ‘Just do it. Don’t be afraid of it.’ I did it, and here I am. I wasn’t sure I belonged in construction, but she proved me wrong.”

McFague enjoys working with Alescia Pierce and another female coworker, Fleet Maintenance Coordinator Missy Madden. “We’re like sisters. We really rely on each other and get along. There are days we can’t believe it’s already four o’clock because we’ve been laughing so much. It’s great.”

People are often surprised to learn McFague works in construction. “They assume I use a hammer and a nail or a shovel. When they realize I run big yellow equipment and move dirt for a living, the reaction I get is, ‘You do what?’ Then when they learn I have a female boss and female coworkers, that’s the real shock-and-awe factor.”

McFague has had a difficult time persuading her other female friends to give the career a chance. “They don’t seem to be interested. To be honest, I don’t think I would have been interested either. Never in a million years would I have imagined I would be doing this. I knew nothing. I was scared.”

“But once I learned what to do, I discovered that it’s really fun. Now I can only say good things about it. And I see only good things from this company. The employees are great, and the owners are great. Alescia and Hal are the two nicest people I’ve ever worked for. Anything we need, we just ask and they are so willing to help us. I’m here for the long haul.”
“WE'RE STRONG”

Like McFague, Madden really enjoys her job. “Every day is different. That’s what I love about it. I’m not a girl who likes to sit behind a desk and answer phones. And it’s just a great work environment. It’s fun. We have a great time together.”

Madden is responsible for maintaining the company’s 160 pieces of equipment, including more than 70 John Deere machines. The company has been running Deere equipment since the 1980s, when it had only four or five employees. In the past few years, the company has grown exponentially. “We just fell in love with the Deere product and today most of our large construction machines are Deere,” says Hal Pierce.

Pierce hired Madden when she was working at a car auction. “Hal had built the building we worked in,” she recalls. “He reached out to a friend and asked if anyone was interested in running parts. I interviewed with him and Alescia, and started that week.”

Every morning when Madden arrives at the shop, she meets with the mechanic and checks maintenance schedules on JDLink™. She then hits the road to obtain filters, fluids, and any parts needed for repairs.

“Some days I go to 11 places, including our dealership, W.I. Clark,” she says. “I don’t know what we’d do without W.I. Clark. I am always welcome there. The staff is great and make it easy for us. Anything we need, they are 100-percent there for us.”

When she’s not helping keep everything running, Madden runs the Deere 300D ADT. “One day we put her in an ADT and realized right away that she could run that, too,” says Pierce. “We turned her loose and she was immediately capable of doing everything an operator can do in that machine.”

When people ask why she works in construction, Madden answers, “Why not? It’s badass. ‘It’s not for everyone. You are surrounded by men, and at times, you’ll come across someone who will assume you don’t know anything. But I have never left here upset. I’m very happy here.”

Madden is proud to be a woman working at a construction company. “It’s an honor, really, so props to Hal for hiring women. It’s something that could open the eyes of other companies. We can get dirty. We’re strong. We can take it and give it right back.”
“WE NEED MORE WOMEN”

Ten years ago, his future wife Alescia became the first woman Hal Pierce hired. “She came to me and told me she wanted to try running a loader,” he remembers. “She picked up on it very fast — she was a natural. We moved her up to larger loaders and she performed even better. She ran the largest loader we had and she was incredible.”

“I’m passionate about my 844K-II Loader,” says Alescia. “I really enjoy spending the day running it. I spend more time in it than I do in my own bed (laughs). I was never a morning person, but now I don’t mind coming to work at 6 a.m.”

And she encourages other women to run equipment. “It’s fun. You’re outside, doing your own thing. It’s very exciting working with women, and we need more women in this business. And we have a wonderful group of other employees who work for us. It makes the day very enjoyable.”

Alescia is excited about the future of Pierce Builders. “Every day Hal and I joke that we’re never going to retire because we just keep getting bigger and bigger, with larger projects, more employees, and more John Deere. We’re very blessed. I’m just really proud of how far we’ve grown from a small company to where we are now — a great group of people and great machines.”

Pierce Builders, Inc. is serviced by W.I. Clark, Wallingford, Connecticut.

EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

With over 70 John Deere machines, Pierce Builders is W.I. Clark’s biggest customer. The local dealer’s rental program helps the construction company keep up with its growing equipment needs. “We work very hard to make sure Pierce has the machines they need,” says Christina Westfort, rental assistant, W.I. Clark of Wallingford, Connecticut. “That’s my favorite part of my job — working with a customer to determine the right machines for what they’re doing and helping them out every step of the way until the job is complete.”

Westfort began working in W.I. Clark’s rental program six years ago. She encouraged other family members to also join the dealership. Her sister works in the parts department and her brother works in the yard. “I love it. It’s comfortable. It’s home.”

Before joining W.I. Clark, Westfort worked as a bartender and preschool teacher. She grew up on a family farm, doing a little bit of everything, including cleaning stalls, moving hay bales, and cutting wood. However, she never learned to run her father’s older farm equipment. “But since I got to W.I. Clark, I’ve learned to operate construction machines.”

Westfort has encountered more women in the construction industry working in the office than in the field. “I don’t deal with too many women who rent equipment, though we do have one woman driver who comes in. I think there should be more women in these roles.”

Westfort considers that a possibility in her own career. “I’d like to stay in the construction business, which may mean moving up in the office. Ultimately I’d love to efficiently operate the machines and get out there and work someday.”

Check out the video at: JohnDeere.com/TheDirt