

Women- & Minority-Owned Businesses



Since founding STI Trucking in 1994, Pat McDonald has had to grease the trailers, change the mud flaps and make sure equipment was safe, as well as run the company.

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Pat McDonald, NAWIC's 2009 president, tells what it takes for a woman-owned construction business to succeed, even in these tough times.

By Greg Aragon

Pat McDonald has made a name for herself in construction.

Since entering the trucking industry in the early 1980s, the California native has worked her way up through various companies, learning everything from billing to truck-trailer maintenance.

In 1994, she founded STI Trucking in San Jose, and last year she was named president of the National Association of Women in Construction. Along the way, she beat breast cancer and learned what it takes for a woman to make it in a field dominated by men.

California Construction magazine recently spoke to McDonald about life in construction.

California Construction: How did you get into construction?

McDonald: I was a stay-at-home, licensed day-care mom and because I had a pending divorce I had to get a job. Through a friend, I got a job doing the books at a freight-hauling trucking company. I did their books, learned dispatch, drove a truck, ran the dock and absorbed all I could. And then four years later I got into construction trucking and progressed through that >>



until I founded STI in 1994.

[Construction] was not what I wanted to do when I grew up, but now I love it.

CC: What do you like most about the construction industry?

McDonald: It is such a great industry. I think one reason is because when you drive down the street and see the different projects that you've been involved in, you remember them and you take some ownership and pride in everyone of them.

CC: What was the biggest challenge you faced in starting your own trucking company?

McDonald: Three years after STI was started, my business partner and her husband backed out and I had to make some tough decisions. Do I continue the company or do I close the whole thing down and I go work for somebody? Because of the skills and support I got in NAWIC, and because of the support of the guys that worked with me, I decided to keep STI going.

At that point I knew nothing except billing. So for the next four years, besides running dispatch and billing, my job was greasing, changing oil and mud flaps and getting to know the equipment and how it ran. I felt I couldn't supervise it if I had no knowledge about it. I think that that learning curve was the toughest thing.

CC: What was the most difficult part of the construction industry to learn?

NAWIC

McDonald: The most difficult area for me was estimating because I feel like it is who you know and I didn't have those contacts in place at the time. And as a woman I found it very difficult to go into a meeting cold and create those contacts on the spot.

CC: How did you overcome this?

McDonald: By persistence. You make mistakes and learn from them and create contacts and get people to know who you are. And it takes a while.

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CC: In general, what roadblocks do you think a woman faces when getting into the construction industry?

McDonald: I truly think that in such a male-dominated industry the biggest roadblock is respect and acknowledgement as an equal. We talk to tradeswomen and it is the same thing, they have to prove themselves if they are out there with a hammer or a welder. I had to do the same thing.

For instance, in my [trucking business] it is mostly minority men who operate their own rigs that pull my trailers and I think it was very difficult at first for them [to realize] that this not-very-big woman was going to grease the trailers and change the mud flaps and make sure the equipment was safe.

CC: What advice would you give to other women who are getting into the industry?

McDonald: I would tell them to follow the NAWIC core values which are: believe

in yourself, dare to go into new horizons and perseverance with the strength of your convictions.

CC: How do you feel about becoming president of the National Association of Women in Construction?

McDonald: I think my presidency, as most, is simply a continuum in keeping the association focused and going forward on what is important, which is helping each other and women in the industry, whether they are members or not. It's an honor and it's exiting, challenging and humbling.

CC: How did this come to be?

McDonald: It was a drive I had. I felt I had good leadership skills and felt I could use them in the association. In the late 90s I decided to run for regional director and then a couple years later I ran for treasurer and then I was just driven to continue up and run for vice president, president-elect and then president.

I felt that with the skills I got from NAWIC, I could help other women to be enthused and increase their knowledge base in construction

CC: What important skills did you learn from NAWIC?

McDonald: I learned not just business skills, but also presentation skills, time-management skills and knowledge about insurance. I've taken courses through the NAWIC Education Foundation, which gave me broader knowledge of the industry.

CC: How have you been affected by the economic downturn?

McDonald: It's a tough economy right now. We've got some stuff on the books, but our gross billing and revenue is down about 40% to 50% from a year ago. We've had to cut prices because of supply and demand: there are too many trucks and not enough work. To help my sub-haulers I lowered my trailer rent. I also had to lay off my maintenance person, so I am back out there again getting greasy. It's what you have to do to survive. <<