

BUILDING WOMEN

Strategies and solutions for women in the building industry

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READY TO WORK

Pre-apprenticeship programs
prepare women for success
in the trades

A publication of NAHB

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The McCaffrey Family: From left, Liz McCaffrey, Brent McCaffrey, Karen McCaffrey, Bob McCaffrey, Lauren Knowlton, Ash Knowlton
Children: Braden and Bryce McCaffrey, Makenna and Kaitlyn Knowlton

WOMEN ON THE RISE

Undaunted by naysayers early on, Karen McCaffrey built a successful company and is mentoring the next generation of women in residential construction

BY LEAH FELLOWS

The road to success for women in the home building industry has been paved by amazing mentors who exemplify a strong work ethic and heart. Karen McCaffrey, vice president of McCaffrey Homes in California, is one of those leaders. Not only has McCaffrey risen through the ranks of the industry, she has created mentoring programs that help other women discover their potential and love of new construction

“You have to be adaptable, you have to stay positive, and keep your eye on the goal,” McCaffrey says.

Building is in McCaffrey’s blood. When she and her sister were 3 and 5 years old, they rode ponies through construction sites with their father, John Bonadelle. Family vacations almost always included visit of model homes for new ideas.

“I remember walking the land with my father and listening to his vision,” she says. “My dad’s passion for home building was contagious. It was clear that I wanted to build homes where families could thrive.”

When McCaffrey and her husband, Bob, joined her father to build new homes and communities in the Central Valley in California more than 40 years ago, she had to work twice as hard as most men to garner respect.

She was undaunted.

“When you do something you love, you overcome the hurdles,” she says. “First, you have to believe in yourself, regardless of what the naysayers may say. Bottom line, it’s about productivity, preparedness, and striving for results.”

The key to achieving greatness, she says, is setting a goal and taking small, incremental steps every day toward fulfilling it.

“I believe in having a purpose and waking up every day and going out and trying to be as productive as you can,” McCaffrey says. “I’ve always believed with work, with life, with projects, you eat an elephant one bite at a time. It’s those small steps that lead to achieving your goal.”

This was very important in the early years dealing with people who didn’t think she could continue the

legacy of her father, who developed much of Fresno and Madera counties over 50 years.

“First you have to believe in yourself regardless of what the naysayers may say,” she says. “Bottom line it’s about productivity, preparedness, and striving for results.”

This positive attitude has helped McCaffrey Homes weather multiple downturns in the real estate market over the years. During the Great Recession, they recognized that their higher-end, expensive product was being met with very slow absorption. They looked at their holdings and realized they had a commercial property that they could convert to affordable, high-density homes.

“We adjusted, adapted, succeeded, and we survived,” she says.



Giving women an opportunity to show what they can do

McCaffrey had few female role models in the building industry as she rose through the ranks, but her mother gave her daughters powerful advice.

“My mother raised us to believe that a man should not define who we are,” she

McCaffrey Homes has had women fill many nontraditional roles, including director of construction, chief operating officer, construction superintendent, controller, civil engineer, and purchasing agent.



WOMEN ON THE RISE

says. "I was taught to stand on my own two feet by working hard and with integrity."

That advice served her well when McCaffrey began working with her husband in 1976. From the beginning, they created a strong partnership that recognized they were equals. They knew they had the commitment and the experience to pick up where her father left off, continue building the company, and stay ahead of the curve.

Over the years, women have filled many nontraditional roles at McCaffrey Homes, including director of construction, chief operating officer, construction superintendent, controller, civil engineer, and purchasing agent.

Women are well positioned to be leaders in the home building industry, McCaffrey says, because women often are the decision makers in buying a new home. Plus, they often have unique perspectives on how families live in a home. Early in her career, she recalls, she looked at floor plans designed by male architects and instantly

To ensure that women continue to have opportunities, McCaffrey Homes is heavily involved in outreach programs, from career days at schools to college internships, to encourage girls and young women to pursue careers in home building.

noticed how far the garages were from the kitchen, which would make bringing groceries in from the car extra tedious.

"We wanted to improve circulation and shorten the steps from the garage to the kitchen," she says. "I think we bring different perspectives and sensibilities."

Once builders began to understand the importance and input women had to offer, designs and the home building industry began to change.

"I think when men started to realize that women are the decision makers in home buying, the industry began marketing and merchandising to women and making the process less intimidating," she says.

One of the biggest shifts McCaffrey has noticed over the years is the advent of professional organizations for women to support each other in the industry. Notably, the NAHB Professional Women in Building Council and the National Association of Women in Construction have begun to change the landscape for women in the building industry.

But engaging women and involving them in the building industry can even begin on the level of client interactions. Because McCaffrey Homes hires women in nontraditional roles, "just those interactions alone with our clients have a ripple effect," she says.

Paving the road for the next generation

To ensure that women continue to have opportunities, McCaffrey Homes is heavily involved in outreach programs, from career days at schools to college internships, to encourage girls and young women to pursue careers in home building. Through a partnership with Fresno State University, the company has created a strong mentoring program for women and offers internships in departments from interior design and marketing to construction.

"It's run the gamut," she says. "We've been very pleased with being able to provide this opportunity. It opens women up to a field they would enjoy and thrive in."

McCaffrey says she finds it especially rewarding to see the evolution of interns when they begin to dip their toes into the construction field and see all the career opportunities.

"Someone may come in thinking that they want to do interior design, but then realize they'd rather be a purchasing agent," she says. "It's a process in learning where the joy in the job resides. They may find they really love the detailed end of it versus meeting with clients. They often find their passion or their real career path."

As a mentor, McCaffrey advises women in home building to follow the formula that has worked for her: Know that you're going to have to work hard for your successes "because no one is going to just give you anything. Come to meetings prepared. Do your homework. Know that you have to prove yourself by getting results." **BW**



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Leah Fellows is founder and chief executive officer of Blue Gypsy Inc., a marketing and consulting company for new home builders, brokers, real estate professionals, and related businesses.