

WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION

*In an industry
long dominated
by men, these
three women are
making a
difference in
Canada's
construction
industry.*

By Susan Doran



Forget that old song, *It's a Man's World*. It's an equal opportunity age, baby. Even in the male-dominated construction industry, where women have traditionally accounted for less than five per cent of workers, things are changing.

There's a shortage of skilled tradespeople, and government-sponsored training programs for

women entering the construction/building/renovation industries are popping up across the country. Help with placement is often available, as are mentorship and career development advice.

The three women profiled here - forerunners of a new age - have achieved recognition in the industry.



Mary Lawson
President
Canadian Home Builders' Association
Orangeville, Ontario

"Men in the building industry now recognize the value of women."

No position in the building industry has a higher profile than that of Canadian Home Builders' Association (CHBA) president, a title Mary Lawson has held since February 2004.

The 5'4" grandmother of four is the first woman to be elected into the top spot in the 6,000-member association's 61-year history.

"As CHBA president," Lawson says, "I'm crisscrossing the country. The men in the industry all recognize the value of women and the different

skills they bring. These include the ability to balance more than one ball at the same time, to plan. Women are detail oriented. We're not likely to walk past a problem two or three times and not fix it. There are a lot more women coming into the industry, and there's room for many more (in a broad range of areas) from the trades to management, sales, planning, design and customer service."

Lawson, who is vice-president and general manager of Dalerose Homes in Orangeville, Ontario, says she's never had difficulty being accepted in the industry. She believes the key is knowing what you're talking about.

About 35 years ago, Lawson, after studying interior design, leapt into the home renovation business in the Toronto area along with her (now) ex-husband, a carpenter. Later she was manager for a developer in Calgary. Coming up through the system, she learned the required business skills as well as how to pick up a hammer and do the physical work.

She has had the unique experience of having been president of Canada's two largest local home-building associations - Calgary's and Toronto's - in 1988 and 1998 respectively. Both were challenging positions, as Calgary hosted the winter Olympic Games during her tenure and Toronto was virtually shut down with building trade strikes.

Now, she's on the board of governors at Toronto's George Brown College, providing advice about educational opportunities in residential construction. She also assists Women in Motion, a mentorship program for young women.

"Women in the industry are telling me they need more support, either in mentoring or in direct education," she says.

These supports, she says, give them the confidence to move forward and help them understand the culture of the industry, which is based on sub-contractors and is rough and ready - not like an office.

Pressure to perform is high, due to factors such as a busy market, a shortage of skilled trades, and outside stress from issues like increased industry taxation and insurance, Lawson says.

"We have to be better business people than ever, and more political," she says.

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Sandra Baldwin

President
A. Lifetime Contractor Ltd.
Toronto

"Know what you're talking about and surround yourself with good people."

When Sandra Baldwin purchased Toronto-based home improvement company A. Lifetime Contractor Ltd. from her father in 2002, she wanted to make the most of what she realized was "a fantastic opportunity."

Although she knew the fundamentals of the small, 57-year-old family business from having worked there first as part-time bookkeeper and later

Erin Zagar

EZ Dimensions
Brampton, Ontario

"I actually had someone ask, 'Your husband is letting you do this?'"

Brampton, Ontario resident Erin Zagar blazed a trail when she came up with the idea of calling herself a 'renovation consultant.'

The concept - new to the construction industry - evolved several years back after Zagar, who has a

as vice-president of sales, she hired a business coach to keep her focused and help her minimize mistakes.

Reaching out for help in this way turned out to be one of the best things she ever did, she says.

"The coach (Mike Pendrith, president of PerformancePoint Corporation in Toronto) keeps me looking at the strategic plan and at how to break down the big goals into bite-size goals that I can take daily to move forward," Baldwin says. "The successes keep me pumped."

She also took the Ontario Ministry of Housing's building code courses, which she says were absolutely invaluable in providing a broader understanding of construction.

The increased confidence resulting from these measures helped her double A. Lifetime Contractor Ltd.'s sales volumes last year.

A believer in the axiom, "You're only as good as the people around you," she credits a lot of her success to her staff, as well as to her coach's continued guidance.

She notes, for instance, that the company's strong marketing materials and the system used to track their effectiveness allows her to know exactly where revenues are coming from.

Baldwin admits that in her line of work, "some of the established associations feel like boys' clubs."

"It's been a male-dominated industry," she says, "but it's a creative industry too. Changing things, designing things - that's something women can enjoy very much."

"I see being a woman as an asset. A customer occasionally may think I don't have the credibility, but not after I talk to them for a while. It's a question of knowing what you're talking about. Over time it all becomes very matter of fact, so gender doesn't come into it. It's not an issue for me."

Except when she considers approaching the bank for a business loan, a process she - as a single woman - has found "humbling" in the past in light of the bank's sometimes antiquated mindset.

certificate in architectural technology, successfully navigated her way through the construction of a large addition to her family home.

Recalling the renovation horror stories she'd heard from friends, she realized she could help guide homeowners through the convoluted renovation process - including key issues like obtaining permits, hiring tradespeople, contracts, and cost-saving opportunities - so that they got the results they were after and their projects came in on time and within budget, as hers had.

Thus her company, EZDimensions, came to be.



Now, besides private consultations (at \$100 per hour), Zagar offers local homeowners one-day workshops and also teaches renovation planning courses at nearby Sheridan College and Peel Continuing Education night schools.

There has been some resistance to Zagar's business, though.

"I actually had someone (a product manufacturer) ask, 'Your husband is letting you do this?'"

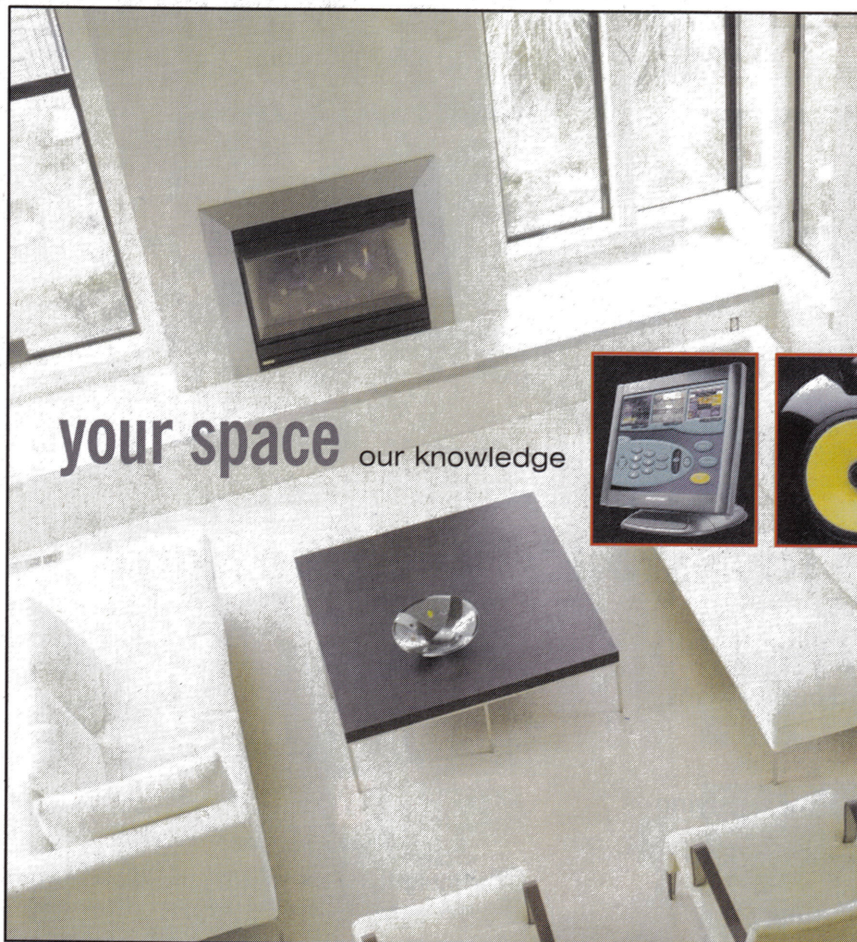
And contractors have told her that homeowners don't need the help she's offering.

It's true that a good contractor could provide the same services that she does, Zagar admits. The trouble is, she says, "A good contractor may not be available," especially if the job is relatively small.

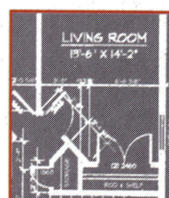
Zagar isn't sure if the resistance she's encountered is due to her gender or to the fact that the renovation consultant concept is new. But certainly, she says, times are changing and the industry is adjusting.

"If people see you know what you're talking about, they notch up the respect," she says. "I'm raising awareness, raising the flag." ■

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