



Left to right: Carol Paul, Ellowyn Nadeau, Nicole Chabot and Colleen Munro (Colin Corneau photo)

In charge at a critical time for construction

No one in construction survives long if they're not built for crisis – the weather, supply issues, workforce shortages.

Coming out of COVID, the industry is juggling economic recovery issues and inflationary pressures, of which fuel prices are just the most visible. And this year, the seemingly incessant rain has upended construction schedules.

It's all testing the mettle of Manitoba's industry leaders, tempered by deep experience from lengthy careers in construction.

"There are a lot of challenges (this year)," says Nicole Chabot, Vice-President of contractor L. Chabot Ent. "This is a tough industry, and we're accustomed to adapting, problem-solving and facing adversity head on."

Construction tends to throw crises after crises at its leaders, agrees Ellowyn Nadeau, a civil engineer and procurement specialist who now works as a construction management instructor at Red River College Polytechnic.

"Every leader has their challenges, whether it's a global pandemic or recession or a local labour shortage," says Nadeau. But women handle challenges differently, and that makes a difference in the industry. "We make more effort to gather information and listen to others around us."

Nadeau and Chabot have seen much of it before. Between them they have 60 years in the industry.

Today, they share another stage. Chabot was elected Chair of Manitoba Heavy Construction Association in 2020; Nadeau assumed the helm of the Winnipeg Construction Association earlier this year.

The women are among a conspicuously female leadership group in the province – and at the national level – stewarding the industry through the current challenges.

The industry is very good at adapting to major shifts, Chabot notes, which served it well when the pandemic hit.

She also agrees a natural inclination to collaborate means women, especially in leadership roles, are an asset in tough times.

"Women are practical, hard workers with a cooperative, team mentality. We realize the importance of building and surrounding yourself with a smart, qualified team."

The biggest issue is workforce recruitment, and convincing society to regard construction as meaningful work that can provide good-paying jobs and long-term careers.

"For a long time, construction was seen as a last resort job for a lot of people. We need to be seen as a first choice," stresses Chabot, whose company employs an average 90 people, operates permanent quarries in Bird's Hill, St Clements, and Alexander, and typically works half a dozen jobsites over the capital region.

And having women lead that change is a good thing. "The days of people working from sun-up to sundown are not the reality anymore," she notes. "I feel for people who want to be at home with their families and kids because I feel the same way."

Colleen Munro, President of Hugh Munro Construction, says women tend to think outside the box more, a necessity when the whole business world is struggling to recruit people, post-pandemic.

Munro knows the recruitment challenge well. The past MHCA Board Chair is now Chair of the Manitoba Construction Sector Council, established in 2009 specifically for workforce development.

Women tend to look for allies and work collectively on problems, she says. "This is one thing women do better. We look for solutions outside of ourselves. It's who you partner with these days in the labour force."

The work women have done to become part of a non-traditional workplace lends real benefit to the industry's current challenge to recruit people from a variety of backgrounds, says Mary Van Buren, President of the Canadian Construction Association.

"Showcasing more women in leadership roles is important in



Mary Van Buren says putting the spotlight on women is important for recruitment

recruitment," says Van Buren. "We all want to see ourselves in the industries we work in, and know that we are valued at all levels."

Munro is working a number of options to recruit for her Lilyfield Quarry, in Rosser, and for a relatively new venture, called ROCKGLASS – super-strong material marketed as an "unbreakable" solution for broken glass, while providing security to residential and commercial properties, including heavy equipment.

Hugh Munro Construction, in road construction for well over 60 years, decided to expand its business model and, aside from launching ROCKGLASS, concentrated on opening Lilyfield quarry in the RM of Rosser, complementing the operations of its other quarries and its Fort Whyte Lowbedding.

Bringing Lilyfield to market required vision and tenacity – others had failed to get it through development-approval hoops – and working with the municipality, community and the provincial government to protect access to valuable aggregate resources.

"You have to drop the ego. You have to know and admit you're not good at everything. You have to find the right people to do the things (you) can't."

Munro is working with local training institutes to recruit and train glaziers, including MITT and the Manitoba Construction Sector Council, led by Carol Paul.

Paul has expanded MCSC's reach to recruit and train women, newcomers and Indigenous workers, including working with First Nations in Northern Manitoba. One annual highlight is the Manitoba Women in Trades conference, this year being held on November 16.

Things are changing in the industry, but you still feel a covert element of discrimination, Paul says. Industry groundbreakers are important, helping to ensure people who haven't traditionally worked in construction get their break, get mentored, acquire the skills and work their way up.

"Colleen and Nicole are so open and receptive when speaking to people," Paul says. "These women in leadership roles, they don't have to tower over anybody. They're humble and they're determined."

"We're modernizing the face of industry," Chabot explains. "We're an industry for everyone and women are part of making that change."



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