

Power of pink

*Building confidence,
contractor demolishes
stereotypes*

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THE JOURNAL RECORD

OKLAHOMA CITY – Women represent only 2.6 percent of the construction industry workforce, according to a study by the National Women's Law Center. But Deemah Ramadan is a big force in the small margin.

Ramadan is CEO and managing partner at Design+Build Group, a commercial construction company. She started the company in 2007, just a few months before the economy crashed. Since the company started, its mission has been to make the construction experience enjoyable.

"When you say to someone that you're a general contractor, they always take two steps back," she said. "We set out to change the name of the general contractors."

But Ramadan is working against more than the stereotype. In her high heels and pink hard hat, she shows the male-dominated construction industry that women can erect buildings, too.

She said she's fought the female stereotype since her first construction job. At that time, she was working with Home Creations and had designed a pad thai restaurant. She eventually became the project's general contractor after she left Home Creations.

"I would call (subcontractors) and they didn't show up," she said. "They would try to rake me over on price."

She often has people talk to her about a project in really broad terms because they don't think she'll understand. Then she'll ask them specific questions, which will make them realize that she knows the industry.

She even had a conversation once where the man asked to speak to her boss because he wanted to see eye-to-eye with the caller. She put the man on hold, and then picked back up the phone and continued the conversation.

"He sends us the best Christmas presents now," she said with a laugh.



Deemah Ramadan, CEO and managing partner at Design+Build Group in Oklahoma City. PHOTO BY BRENT FUCHS

Ramadan is not alone fighting the gender stereotype in her field, but there aren't many women helping her. According to the National Women's Law Center study, there are more than 7.6 million male construction workers in the U.S., but only 206,000 women construction employees.

"I lose more jobs because I'm not part of the good old boys' club," she said.

Conversely, Ramadan was invited to bid on a job because she's a woman. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport is renovating Terminal D and requested women and disadvantaged businesses to bid on the project. She said she's never seen similar qualification in an Oklahoma project, but she puts her woman-owned business certification in all her bid responses.

Dunlap Codding law firm director Doug Sorocco just wanted a good building and someone who could design an office for the creative group. He was

able to find a designer and a builder with Ramadan. She even found the building at 609 W. Sheridan Ave.

"She got us excited and helped make the case for the building and the location," he said.

While Sorocco was excited about the project, Valliance Bank Senior Vice President of Commercial Lending Jesse Cowan wasn't on board in the beginning.

"We didn't know a lot about (Design+Build Group)," Cowan said. "They hadn't been in business that long. Our concern from a lending standpoint was we wanted to make sure the project was going to get completed as promised, and the bank's collateral was what it was expected to be. (The building renovation) was a big undertaking. It wasn't a project you think any builder will be able to do. We didn't have a high level of confidence."

After Design+Build completed the Dunlap Codding project, Cowan's

impression of the company changed. He even keeps it on a short list of builders he recommends when people are looking for a company.

"They were one of the best builders I've worked with from a builder's standpoint," he said. "They were very focused on detail and very good at communication – maybe overcommunicated."

Ramadan takes a lot of pride in her company's weekly meeting packet. Every week, she and her team sit down with the client and talk about the building. The customer hears a full update, including the weather report.

Sorocco said he first dreaded the meetings, because he hates meetings. Yet Ramadan was very conscious of his time and made sure he was told only information he needed to hear.

"It was very respectful of my time," he said. "It was just a brilliant way to do customer-to-client service."