



What I Wish I Knew Starting Out in Construction

I grew up in construction. I remember having a conversation with another woman in the industry who asked me when I got started. I laughed and said, “One year old”, because that’s honestly when it began for me. I was born into this world.

My parents built a successful construction company with over 50 employees, in business for more than 30 years, and part of our family’s story for over a century. But even growing up in it, I still had to find my own way.

This industry teaches you quickly. Navigating daily conversations, solving problems on the fly, and learning how to communicate, especially in rooms where you’re often the only woman, can be intimidating at first. I had to build that confidence over time, just like anyone else.

With all that being said, if I could go back and talk to my younger self, the one stepping onto jobsites, trying to prove herself, figuring it out as she went, there are a few things I would say.

Not because I did it wrong... but because I learned it the hard way.

And if this helps even one woman coming up in this industry feel more confident, more prepared, or just a little less alone, it’s worth it.

You Don’t Have to Know Everything, But You Do Have to Show Up Ready to Learn

Construction isn’t something you master overnight. No one walks onto a jobsite knowing it all, and if they say they do, they’re probably the one you should be learning the least from.

This industry is built on experience, and experience only comes with time, mistakes, and showing up day after day willing to figure it out. There are things you can’t learn from a book, how to read a jobsite, how to anticipate problems before they happen, how to communicate with different personalities, how to earn respect. That only comes from being in it.

What matters most is your willingness to learn, ask questions, and stay engaged. Don’t be afraid to speak up, even if you think it’s a “stupid” question, because it’s not. The fastest way to grow is to stay curious and be present in every situation, whether it’s going smoothly or completely off track.

The people who succeed in this industry aren’t the ones who know everything, they’re the ones who never stop learning. They listen more than they talk. They pay attention. They take feedback, even when it’s not delivered perfectly. And they keep showing up better the next day.

If you stay coachable, stay hungry, and stay willing to learn, even on the hard days, you’ll go a lot further than someone who thinks they’ve already figured it all out.



Confidence Comes From Doing, Not Waiting

There's this idea that you need to feel confident before you speak up, take charge, or step into leadership.

That's not how it works.

Confidence is built by doing the uncomfortable things, speaking up in the meeting, asking the question, making the call. You don't wait until you feel ready. You earn it through action.

I can say for myself how much confidence I've gained over the years in this industry. At my core, I'm naturally soft-spoken. But when you're put in situations that require you to speak up, stand your ground, and stay true to your integrity, you realize there isn't another option—you rise to it. And the truth is, if you don't believe in yourself, how can you expect anyone else to believe in what you have to offer?

When I started out, I didn't know anything about the waste industry. The most I knew was taking the trash to the curb at my house. Everything I know today, I had to learn, and even now, it barely scratches the surface of how much there is to know.

In the beginning, it felt like smoke and mirrors. I was figuring it out in real time, learning as I went, growing while I was building. But that's the reality of it, you don't wait until you have all the answers. You step into it, you do the work, and confidence follows.

You Belong Here, Even If It Doesn't Always Feel Like It

Walking onto a jobsite as a young woman can feel intimidating. You might be the only one. You might feel like all eyes are on you, like you have to prove yourself twice as much just to be taken seriously.

But here's the truth: you don't need to earn your seat at the table by being someone else.

You belong there because you show up, you work hard, and you bring value, period. Not because you're the loudest in the room, not because you try to blend in, and not because you change who you are to fit the mold.

Respect in this industry isn't given because you talk a certain way or act like everyone else, it's earned through consistency. It's showing up prepared, doing what you say you're going to do, and standing behind your word. Over time, that speaks louder than anything else ever could.



And the reality is, the right people, the ones worth working with, will respect you for exactly who you are. Stay grounded in that. Be authentic, be dependable, and let your work speak for you.

Respect Is Earned Through Consistency

It's not about being the loudest voice in the room, it's about being reliable.

Doing what you say you're going to do. Following through. Showing up, every single time, even on the days it's inconvenient or tough.

That's what builds respect in this industry. Not talk, consistency. Not promises, execution.

People remember who they can count on. The person who answers the call, gets the job done, and stands behind their word. That reputation isn't built overnight, but once you have it, it speaks for you before you even say a word.

Find Your People

This industry can be tough. That's why having a strong network matters.

Find the people who support you, challenge you, and want to see you succeed. Whether it's mentors, coworkers, or organizations like PWB, community makes all the difference.

You don't have to do this alone.

Speak Up, Your Voice Matters

Early on, it's easy to stay quiet. To observe instead of contribute. I had a tendency to want to blend into the background because I hadn't yet gained my confidence in this industry.

But your perspective matters. Your ideas matter.

And more often than not, someone else in the room is thinking the same thing, you just have to be the one willing to say it first.

Final Thought

Construction will challenge you. It will push you. It will test you. Every single day.

But it will also build you, into someone stronger, more confident, and more capable than you ever imagined.



If you're just starting out, keep going. You're not behind. You're not out of place.

You're exactly where you're supposed to be.

— Julie McKeon
President & COO, Stilo Disposal
Chair, Metro BCA PWB