

Executive of the Month: With 20 years of experience, Barbara Kavovit, CEO of Evergreen is a construction powerhouse

June 04, 2019 - Front Section



Kavovit at Bandier construction site, 0 Bond Street - Manhattan, NY

New York, NY The New York Real Estate Journal recently sat down with Barbara Kavovit, CEO of Evergreen Construction for a question and answer session.

NYREJ: Tell us about Evergreen Construction and why you created the company.

Kavovit: Evergreen Construction was founded four years ago. At that time, I had 20 years of experience in the construction industry. We specialize in corporate and retail construction for Fortune 500 and entrepreneurial clients including Bandier, Hyatt Corp. for Exhale Studios, Kipling, and BKLYN CLAY. Prior to Evergreen, I was founder and CEO of Anchor Construction and created a line of tools called DIYVA by Barbara K.

While working as a consultant for one of the largest construction companies I came to realize my calling was still to be a leader as CEO and started Evergreen Construction. A lot of time had passed and I was completely baffled to find that the industry had not changed one bit. It was still completely a Boys Club. A change was needed and shaking things up meant bringing a strong female voice into the industry. My company holds a lot of personal meaning as it's named after the street in the Bronx where my dad grew up. I always attribute my interest in building to his guidance since the day we started our bunk-bed building project together when I was 9.

Kavovit at Bandiers new headquarters,
0 Bond Street - Manhattan, NY

NYREJ: What did you study in college? How did you get into the construction business?

Kavovit: I attended SUNY Oswego and have a BS degree in Finance and Economics. After getting fired from my first job as a financial analyst (where I was really a glorified coffee goffer), I heard my mom and her friends discussing how they had such a difficult time getting their handymen to show up or that their husbands wouldn't complete their 'honey-do' list. That's how my first company, Stand Ins, was created.

My Mom always instilled a sense of independence in my sister and I, and I believed these ladies should know how to fix basic things themselves in their home! So armed with \$60, I created business cards at the local print shop and stood outside of a shopping center in Scarsdale, N.Y. introducing myself and my newly formed company. The premise was simple, anyone that needed anything fixed around the house didn't need to fuss, they could "call us."

When someone called about a repair or improvement project they were actually calling my parent's home phone (we didn't have cell phones back then) and my mom would call up to me and say, "Barbara, it's Mrs. Burnbaum and she needs her leaky faucet fixed." I was so excited when I would get a job and I'd search the local newspapers for the right contractor, pick them up in my dad's old 1975 Buick LeSabre and make sure they did the job right. I didn't know at the time, but I was doing the job of a general contractor.

NYREJ: What do you regard as the greatest success in your career to date and what are you working on next?

Kavovit: I've had incredible opportunities to work in some of New York's most iconic buildings including the Empire State Building, 30 Rock and 0 Bond. My favorite project to date was working in Carnegie Hall Towers.

We have many exciting projects in the pipeline this year and we just finished Bandier's corporate headquarters as well as their flagship retail store at 0 Bond. We're also working on our third project with the Hyatt Corp./Exhale Studios, Rue Gilt and BKLYN CLAY to build their ceramics studio.

NYREJ: What guidance would you give a woman who wants to get into this industry?

Kavovit: As a woman in a male-dominated field, you may find that your knowledge and expertise are constantly in question. Knowing your product or, in this case, the scope of work and plans that you intend to build off of is key. Don't leave it to chance that your project manager or field super will take care of it. In other words, you need to be 10 times better than your male counterparts to be

considered equal. Always exude confidence in the workplace, be familiar with your strengths and weaknesses and always be resilient.

NYREJ: What are some of the pitfalls you face as a woman in the construction industry?

Kavovit: Often, the subcontractors at a construction site will confuse me for the client or a designer. The last thing they expect is that I'm the CEO of a construction company. Women may have to go one step further to earn respect in situations where they find they're not taken seriously. I once had one of my employees ask if I even knew how to read a blueprint—one of the most important skills anyone in this industry needs to know—while I was in front of a client. (I fired him). Bottom line in any industry, regardless of your gender, respect on a jobsite, in the office or a boardroom has to be earned.

I'm not new to the New York construction industry. I've been working for over 20 years and yet still have to fight to be considered for every job. You would think by now certain architects and owners reps would have Evergreen on a rotation of companies to consider on their projects, but unfortunately, that's just not the case. Luckily more women are now in decision making positions and are looking for new options from the obsolete and primitive companies that still exist.

NYREJ: How do we get more women working in construction?

Kavovit: Internally, my company paves the way by creating opportunities for women where they will thrive. Place women on a job site, give them responsibility that allows them to showcase their skills, and you will have one hell of a successful project. Some of my project managers and field supers are women and they are absolute powerhouses that boss around 50 men at the construction site. We need more women on construction sites to start changing the way men perceive us in this field.

We also need to give young women access to proper training and prepare them for jobs in the industry. Finally, we need to have good quality clothing available that is specifically designed for women in construction. Maybe I've discovered my next business venture!

NYREJ: What's next for you?

Kavovit: I am so excited that my first novel, *Heels of Steel*, will be released on June 25th! The story is about Bronx-born Bridget Steele, a scrappy and determined young woman who fights her way into the good old boys club and builds one of the largest and most successful construction companies in New York City, only to get a shot at building one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city. As you may have guessed, the story is based on my personal experience building Evergreen construction and making a name for myself in this industry. Perfect time in the world today to tell this type of authentic story!

Lastly, I'm so passionate about this book in hopes that it empowers other women to follow their career goals and know that women can be smart, strong, sexy and embrace their femininity, no matter what career path they choose.

The construction industry has definitely improved since I first began, but we still have a long way to go to make it a more inclusive business.

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