

Executive of the Month: Lara McNicol is making a difference in people's lives every day at TSC Training Academy

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Lara McNicol, TSCTA

Queens, NY “I know that what I do makes a difference in people's lives. Safety training prevents accidents and injuries and delivers people home safely at the end of the day. Yet, my work goes beyond that. I assist workers in finding their place and help them transition to a different capacity. I keep them employed and help them support their families,” said Lara McNicol, assistant director of TSC Training Academy, LLC (TSCTA), an affiliate of comprehensive turnkey safety solutions company Total Safety Consulting, LLC (TSC), with offices in Long Island City, N.Y. and Bayonne, N.J.

Named for the headstrong Lara in Dr. Zhivago, McNicol applies her talents daily to a position that incorporates construction and education, fields that touched her life long before she recognized either as a potential career path.

She was born and raised in Freeport, N.Y. Her father was a schoolteacher in Bushwick, her mother a graphic designer. Her stepfather, the CFO of Richter and Ratner, a general contractor where McNicol worked summers while in high school, introduced her to the construction industry.

She studied psychology at Queens College despite her parents' urging that she become a teacher.

"I wanted to go my own way," she said.

Yet her full-time day job at a technical school, Computer Career Center (CCC), revealed an innate talent for education as she rapidly rose from clerk, to assistant to the dean, then onto assistant dean.

"They saw something in me. I had ideas and took initiative," she said.

McNicol oversees operations at TSC Training Academy.

After completing her B.A., McNicol worked part-time at a masonry company housed in a 'smoky shanty' piled high with hard hats and blueprints. She studied evenings in the masters' program in forensic psychology at John Jay College.

"Being on a jobsite instead of the sterile confines of an office made construction-related safety resonate with me," she said. After completing her masters, she learned of a job opening at what was then the TSC training center.

In 2003, she was hired as program coordinator to the center that evolved into the TSC Training Academy.

"I am following my father's example after all. He gave his students structure, just as I try to guide construction workers," she said. She was promoted to administrator of professional development and accreditation in 2013 and, in 2017, to assistant director.

Keeping Workers Compliant

Workers often have difficulty navigating the nuances of a highly regulated industry where the penalties of non-compliance are steep.

"Without the required training, you'll be out of a job," said McNicol.

To accommodate workers who aren't fluent in English, TSCTA offers classes and resources in multiple languages including Spanish, Polish, Chinese, and others when needed. TSCTA has relationships with many community organizations and extends economically disadvantaged workers substantial discounts.

McNicol helps steer workers clear of scams where disingenuous individuals' take students' money in return for fake safety training cards. Most recently, she helped design TSCTA's Site Safety Training (SST) cards that affirm authenticity via holographic images, embedded photos, and QR codes that reveal a unique, electronic record of the cardholder.

McNicol also designs the training curriculum at TSC Training Academy, refining it based on student feedback.

Helping Design, Develop and Deliver Classes and Curriculums

McNicol plays a key role in every aspect of the learning process at TSCTA. She was the lead driving force for the acquisition and maintenance of its IACET accreditation secured in 2014 and recently renewed through 2024. She assists in designing the curriculum, advises instructors on the adult learning process and helps develop classroom settings. She analyzes students' performance on exams and studies student feedback on evaluations to measure if the course met its learning objectives.

"Cookie cutter classes don't work," she said. "Sometimes it's necessary to redefine the learning experience."

To engage students who arrive at evening classes following a day of work, the Academy may show a film, conduct a Q & A session, or break classes into small groups. Listening to students' questions and concerns validates their experience.

After auditing classes for over 16 years, McNicol is now actively pursuing becoming an authorized OSHA instructor. "My role is always evolving," she said. "This isn't a job as much as an adventure. I'm involved in so many parts of a much larger picture."

A New Location in the Bronx

McNicol was active in vetting the space for the new TSCTA branch in the Bronx, an underserved area that has become a hub for local workers to gather, learn, and collaborate. The campus includes Safety Supplies Unlimited, LLC (SSU) an affiliate of TSC, giving students immediate access to essential safety supplies and equipment. Other branches of TSCTA are in Long Island City, N.Y. and Bayonne, N.J.

A Major Fan of Managing Principals Jim and Liz Bifulco

Her admiration for TSC's founders, managing principals James (Jim) and Elizabeth (Liz) Bifulco, is strong.

"They are role models of how to uniquely balance and complement each other," she said. Noting that the company launched in a basement office of Jim Bifulco's father's law firm has "grown by leaps and bounds" and she finds herself fortunate for "being an instrumental part of a versatile company whose underlying mission is to educate and protect people's welfare."

"The Bifulcos invest in their people. And the investment of time I put in, I get back tenfold," she said.

McNicol also counts as role models training director Tom Ferrante, TSC director of field operations John Connolly, and Nancy Anatra, former dean at Computer Career Center.

A Woman in a Male-Dominated Field

"As a woman in a male-dominated field, you've got to dive in, to demonstrate that you're capable. I put my feet on the ground and didn't waver," she said.

Site safety training classes are still comprised of under 10% women, yet the numbers are increasing.

"We're not an anomaly anymore. We're challenged, but we're more accepted and respected. Now we need to become a standard," she said.

She reflects back to her summer job in high school. "Men were on the frontlines and women were the assistants in the background, yet they were the glue that held it all together. We're much more visible now," she said.

Forecast on the Future – The Industry and TSC

McNicol believes that VR (Virtual Reality) has the potential to transform the industry.

"VR, the next big move for safety training, recreates realistic scenarios, plus the emotions, sensations, and distractions that haunt hazardous work environments. VR training works because it offers a controlled environment."

McNicol envisions a bright future ahead for the construction safety industry, for the TSCTA team, and all of TSC and its family of companies. "TSC is moving forward, it is continuing to evolve and grow. Branches outside of New York and possibly the nation are possible. We're educating today for a safer tomorrow. It's a bright horizon."