



Elizabeth Collins of Aragon Construction is paving the way for women in a male-dominated profession

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Elizabeth Collins distinctly remembers the first time she decided that she wanted to pursue a career in construction. She was just four years old and watching her grandfather, a well-respected architect, repair a broken radio and recalls thinking to herself, "Wow, how'd he do that?!" Ever since that September afternoon in her early childhood, Collins, a born and bred New Yorker, has been fascinated with "restoring and building things."

Today, at 33 years old, Collins is the only female project manager at Aragon Construction, New York's leading general contracting and construction management firm specializing in interior construction fit-outs, and she is paving the way for women in a male-dominated profession.

"It's trying at times," Collins admits of being in the industry. "I have to work extra hard to gain trust and respect from others, but at the end of the day, working as a woman in a male-dominated profession builds character." She credits Aragon's welcoming and supportive work environment with making an otherwise challenging situation that much more surmountable: "Aragon offers a fantastic atmosphere in which to work, I've always felt respected and valued here," she says.

Collins, who has worked in the construction industry for 14 years, boasts a strong résumé with a wide range of professional achievements that set her apart from competitors in the field. After earning an associate of science degree in Computer Science, Collins began working on the maintenance team at The Durst Organization, but she quickly moved up the ranks at the real estate company and was soon asked to join the stone restoration team where she ultimately became assistant supervisor. "Here, I was finally exposed to various areas of construction for the first time," Collins said, and so too, the challenges a woman faces working in a physically demanding, male-dominated field. "It was five men and I was the only female," she recalls. "There were men who thought I couldn't handle it at first, but I worked on it...I worked hard on my physical strength and always got the job done."

After six years on the stone restoration team, Collins decided it was time to flex her brain muscles instead of her biceps, and spent the next several years honing her project coordination skills. At Hird Blaker, a mill working firm, she served as contract administrator ("I taught myself how to read blueprints, generated scopes for our subs and dealt with contracts," she says of her time there) and then at Stonewall Contracting Corp., a core and shell firm, she gained experience out in the field and was responsible for constructing the Bed Tower at Coney Island Hospital. But it was her time with Ball Construction, an interiors company where she juggled the responsibilities of handling 21 active projects, that most prepared her for the current role at Aragon.

As project manager at Aragon, Collins serves as the primary filter between the subcontractors, assists the project team, tracks the building permit process and coordinates with the supers so projects run smoothly. While she handles all the paperwork, including the scheduling of elevator

requests, insurance certificates, purchase orders, change orders and job schedules, and helps track the progress of each project, 85% of her job involves being out in the field. It's this part that she finds most gratifying.

She recently oversaw Aragon's completion of a 3,600 s/f Lifestyles Fitness Center at Peter Cooper Village. "We transformed a supermarket into a state of the art fitness center in just 6 week," she said, noting that the new facility features a new rooftop air conditioning and heating unit, spring loaded floors, imported River Stone, a 120 ft. custom-stained maple wall, locker rooms and a reception area. She is also proud of the seamless results she helped Aragon obtain for Robert Half International at 245 Park Ave., where 38,000 s/f was built-out in 4 phases while fully occupied. These phases included new wood and marble finishes in the reception area and elevator lobby, a new pantry and data room, open areas and offices with glass vision panels, high-end millwork and wall talkers.

Collins believes that Aragon has allowed her to grow in her chosen career field, and she offers the following advice to other women looking to start a career in construction. "Don't shy away from the business," she says. "If this is what you want to do, stay strong and step up to the plate and make it happen, never let anyone deter you from your ultimate goal."

Collins recognizes that being the only female project manager at Aragon makes her unique, and she describes the social scene in the office as a bit of a "boys club."

"I'm not exactly in it," she jokes, "but they embrace it when I come around. I wouldn't share a cigar with them, but I would certainly have a glass of whiskey with them."

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