



## **Design/Build Executive of the Month: Rachel Ataman, owner, Touchstone Environmental**

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Centereach, NY The New York Real Estate Journal (NYREJ) sat down for a question and answer session with Rachel Ataman, PG, this month's Design/Build Executive of the Month. Ataman is a New York State certified geologist with over 19 years of experience, she is the founder and president of Touchstone Environmental Geology, P.C.

Based in Long Island, Touchstone Environmental Geology is a full service, New York State certified environmental consulting firm, performing various services including Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs), Phase II ESAs and Site Remediation.

Touchstone Environmental has managed a large variety of environmental projects throughout the Tri-State Area including State Spills Sites, NYC Voluntary Cleanup Sites and New York State

Brownfield Sites.

NYREJ: Why did you open your own consulting firm when there are already so many environmental firms in the Tri-State area?

Ataman: I wanted to open a company with an innovative approach to environmental consulting. Many companies are merely collecting the same data and making the same recommendations, following a cookie cutter pattern. I felt the market was ripe for a new approach to environmental consulting. As an example, Phase I ESAs recommendations should be appropriate for the property type and use and should also be helpful to quantify risk for lending institutions. If recognized environmental conditions (RECs) exist on a property we have the knowledge and experience to understand the cost to investigate, and if necessary, remediate.

Additionally, I wanted to offer clients an affordable option in the Tri-State area. My business model allows for my projects to be completed on time, within budget and with excellent customer service. We are giving our clients the timing, budget and excellent service they need to make intelligent and fully informed decisions in a timely manner.

NYREJ: What inspired you to want to work in the environmental field?

Ataman: Growing up I always enjoyed being outside and playing in the dirt. My favorite place was—and still is—the Museum of Natural History. After taking my first geology class in high school I was hooked on geology but at that time did not realize what an environmental geologist did. Today, I am inspired to work in this field every day because I get to help my clients solve their on-site environmental problems while simultaneously clean up New York City one property at a time. For me environmental geology is the best of two worlds, I get to use my geeky geology side and also get to work every day with my interesting clients.

NYREJ: What made you want to start your own business?

Ataman: My father owned his own ice company so as a child seeing him manage his business was very inspiring. It also made business ownership second nature. I will never forget going with him on his sales calls and seeing him interact with his clients. Throughout my life I have always been a leader and took on managing and vice presential positions at my former firm, one of the largest and busiest in the Tri-State. I wanted to start my own business so I could have more control of how our clients are treated, how the business is managed and how reports are prepared.

NYREJ: What services does Touchstone Environmental offer?

Ataman: Touchstone offers a variety of environmental services including Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs), Phase II ESAs, Subsurface Investigations, soil and tank removals/excavations, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) spill investigations and remediation, New York City Office of Environmental Remediation (NYCOER) “E” designation investigation and remediation, and NYSDEC Brownfield investigations and

management.

Touchstone Environmental has worked with properties ranging from apartment buildings with petroleum tank RECs to large multi-acre Brownfield projects with soil, groundwater and vapor conditions and everything in between including gas stations, former/active dry cleaners and abandoned lots.

NYREJ: What are major changes that you anticipate happening over the next few years in the environmental world.

Ataman: The NYSDEC is starting to regulate emerging contaminants in the soil and groundwater including Per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contaminants. While these chemicals are being phased out of use, they are still used in many common household and commercial products, such as non-stick coatings, waterproof fabrics, firefighting foams, car soaps/waxes, and cosmetics. Because of their wide applications these compounds are frequently found in the soil and groundwater throughout the Tri-State area. Recently the NYSDEC and NYCOER have been requesting PFAS testing and in some cases the remediation of PFAS. PFAS compounds are not currently considered in the ASTM Phase I ESA scope; however, since PFAS compounds can be considered a contaminant of concern by regulatory agencies, Touchstone has begun reviewing historical property use and surrounding property use for suspect PFAS sources. Including PFAS in our reports makes us very innovative in the industry.

Other changes I anticipate happening is the new ASTM standard for Phase I ESAs, ASTM Standard E1527-21. The new standard will most likely require more historical research on sites and may impact the time it takes for a full Phase I ESA to be completed. Touchstone is following the new guideline updates closely. We have started to prepare new report templates and are training in the ASTM E1527-21 to prepare for the new standard. We believe we are ahead of the curve and our turnaround times should not be impacted. Our Phase I ESAs are currently completed in a 2-week turnaround time and our Phase II ESAs are completed in a 3-week turnaround time.

NYREJ: What are your next steps?

Ataman: I want Touchstone to continue to grow. I started the business about four years ago with only myself. Working alone allowed me time to think about my business model and read so much about business leaders, marketing and business culture. I understand the working culture that determines the success of Touchstone Environmental. Therefore, I am a hands-on business leader providing my employees with a safe, positive, pro-family environment that allows my employees to flourish and perform at their best. In the stressful real estate environmental we have become very successful in preparing and submitting reports on-time without overworking ourselves. This avoids errors and time delays.

I have also met so many wonderful clients, colleagues, and regulators throughout my 19-year career. I look forward to meeting new clients and tackling new projects.