

Women Contractors, Tough Cookies Among Us

By Sophie Braccini

They're creative, they command respect and they are a rarity, but some local women who are licensed general contractors have a very successful niche in a man's world. Judy Dinkle (JD Design), Kathy Kovell (Big Red) and Kari Grosz (Lamorinda Construction) have built their professional success through resilience and hard work.

They all have been in the trade for more than ten years. Kovell explains, "If you are a woman contractor and have survived, it means that you are twice as good as your male counterparts." Because the profession is mainly male, these women had to fight prejudices.

"At first, sub-contractors didn't take me very seriously," recalls Dinkle. For Kovell it was the same question when she met new people: "Is this your husband's company, or your father's?" She too had difficulty finding the right subcontractors. Grosz says it was a question of authority. "Even my wife doesn't talk to me that way," complained a sub-contractor whose work she had criticized. To that challenge, they responded by creating long time relationships with employees and subcontractors.

Loyalty, hard work and resilience seem to be the trademark for the three women. If they know how to deal with tough people and situations, it may be because each of them has had to work through difficult times in their own lives.

In 1998, Dinkle became the sole provider for her daughter and had no choice but professional success to put the young lady through school and college; Kovell is a breast cancer survivor, and Grosz put herself through college over a seven and a half year period, cleaning homes and offices at night to afford tuition.

None of the women chose the building industry in college. Dinkle is a graphic artist and teacher by training; Kovell is a CPA and Grosz a marketing major who specialized in event planning. But all of their first professions had something that translated into the contractor's world and they took advantage of specificities that are inherent, they believe, to their feminine side.

"Women were born to do this, it is so much fun," says Kovell, who sees women as being more organized, more detailed oriented, better at communicating and building consensus than their male counterparts. The three highlight sensitivity to customers' needs as their forte.

"Remodels are driven by the type of life people live," says Dinkle, "my job is to understand where they are now and what their needs will be in the years to come as the children grow up and technology evolves." Grosz agrees, "When you enter someone's home, you need to work around the family, respect their environment and their lives."

Their creativity translates into very high customer satisfaction rates. Margie Goldstein hired Dinkle to remodel the family room and bath and the children's bathroom in their Moraga home. It was love at first sight. "Judy immediately understood what we are about and created for us spaces that fit perfectly the function, our style and budget," states an enthusiastic Margie, "she made the process as painless as possible for us, I didn't experience any stress." She believes that the changes Judy affected ended up being more than what she had ever expected.

Big Red customers Jay and Sventlana Hill live in Orinda Woods. Their kitchen needed a complete remodel. "Kathy did a great job from be-



Margie Goldstein (left) and Judy Dinkle (right) chat in a renovated kids' bathroom

Photo Sophie Braccini

ginning to end," says Hill. "When we started she told us that her job was to make everyone happy and that's what she did." The Hills felt that they were listened to, that they could change their mind and be taken care of. "She cares for the workers, too," adds Hill, "she's like a mother to them." "Everything was done quickly, they worked on Saturdays, the work was finished on time and for the price we were promised," they add.

Kim Berry in Lafayette hired Grosz for the master bedroom and bath in their Lafayette home. "I loved working with a female," says Berry, "Kari has a great sense of style, she adds feminine touches, it was awesome to go shopping with her." Grosz's reliability was essential for this family with two young children and two working parents. They were even able to stay in the house during the work. "It's more convenient for contractors to have people out of their house," says Grosz, "but often it is not the case for families." Berry confirms, "We lived in the house the entire time. The workers always cleaned every evening." The Berry's say they would hire Grosz again in a heartbeat.

The three women get their jobs through referrals. They are booked for months to come, but it is always possible to get on their waiting list and they might be available for small projects. Big Red Construction (925) 962-0145, JD Design (925) 631-0562, Lamorinda Construction (925) 899-7201.