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Managing construction projects, motherhood

Jennifer Caldwell's professionalism and efficiency has so impressed her boss that 'I feel very lucky to have her as an employee'

By Rod Belcher

Project management for a construction firm can be a tricky and harrowing job. It's a high-pressure, high-stress position where you have the unenviable task of trying to make everyone involved in the construction process happy—not always easy to do.

Now imagine doing that job with a new-born at home. It's all in a day's work for Roanoke-based Building Specialists Inc. (BSI) Project Manager Jennifer Caldwell.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," Caldwell says. "I like to be active, to get out into the field. I don't like to be stuck behind a desk. I really enjoy what I do."

Typically, Caldwell is juggling five to seven jobs at a time. Her involvement in a project is from its inception to completion. She's responsible for taking the initial estimate and then working with the job superintendent and crew to make sure that the project runs smoothly, on budget and on time. She also has to accommodate the needs and concerns of residential clients who are likely to be very hands-on about their home construction or remodeling.

BSI President Bob Fetzer admits that when he interviewed a five-month pregnant Caldwell



Dan Smith

Jennifer Caldwell: 'There have been superintendents and sub-contractors that voiced their resentment at working for a woman,' says Bob Fetzer. 'However through her cool, calm and collected manner; her leadership and management skills she has earned their respect'

for the job, a little over a year ago, he had some apprehensions.

"Having the right person in the right place is crucial," Fetzer explains. "As the head of a firm, delivery of services and goods is always a challenge. When I interviewed her, we were about to start a large project with a two-year commitment. In the back of my head, I was wondering if she would want to come back after the baby arrived."

Best ever

But Caldwell won over Fetzer and BSI Vice President Daniel Hurst and secured the job. Fetzer says now it was a

major turning point for their business.

"I think that in over 32 years of business, Jennifer Caldwell is one of the most outstanding project managers I have ever worked with," he says. "She has multiple responsibilities to coordinate with supervisors, owners and sub-contractors to make sure they are all on the same page. It's a lot to keep up with but she does an outstanding job for us."

Caldwell graduated from Clemson with a degree in construction science and management. She says her interest in construction comes from her father.

"My dad did additions to

every home we lived in," she says. "I really fell in love with the idea of watching a plan become a reality—to see something coming up out of the ground."

Caldwell went on to work in the track building market after school. She helped develop and build large projects, like residential subdivisions. She also gained commercial project experience, from working on everything from school additions to tenant upfits and new retail constructions.

"I think Jennifer's work experience really benefits her," Fetzer says. "She has worked in

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many different areas and learned how to apply that experience to doing a remodeling or a customized home project. She has developed a systematic program of integrating projects to make multiple tasks look easy.”

Now, after 13 years in the construction business, Caldwell says she is happy with where she is. “I’m working for a great company,” she says. “Bob Fetzner has been supportive of me especially during the period when I was on maternity leave.”

High-tech home

One of Caldwell’s current and largest projects—the one she is most proud of—is the development and construction of the multi-million dollar home

of Doug and Polly Fikse at Water’s Edge on Smith Mountain Lake. Fikse, the president of Pennsylvania-based high-tech company OnQ Legrand, wanted to develop a 10,500-square-foot home with an array of cutting-edge technological innovations.

The Fikse project was the one Caldwell started when she first joined BSI and in the middle of it she went on maternity leave. Fetzner says that even while she was away from the office, Caldwell managed to coordinate with her temporary replacement and the other principals involved in the project.

Even after the birth of Caldwell’s daughter, Kathryn—now 11 months old—Jennifer used telecommuting to ease her

way back to a 40-to-45 hour work-week while getting used to the equally hectic and multitasking job of a new mother.

“She’s technology savvy,” Fetzner says. “Even with a 20-hour week, she was getting an awful lot accomplished through e-mail.”

Today, Caldwell, and her husband, Frank—who is also in the construction business as a manager for Chandler Concrete—tag-team their busy work schedules to make sure that their family runs as smoothly as Jennifer’s projects. “Frank helps out a lot,” she says. “If I’m working late, he picks up Kathryn. We adjust.”

Caldwell also says having such a positive and supportive work environment helps, too. To

Bob Fetzner, such adjustments are worth the employee he has.

“I feel very lucky to have her as an employee,” he says. “Families are important and we have to modify how we think about those things in the work force. Technology has helped with that immensely.

“Construction has been a very old-school, macho industry for a long time. Jennifer really broke the glass ceiling a bit. There have been superintendents and sub-contractors that voiced their resentment at working for a woman. However through her cool, calm and collected manner her leadership and management skills, she has earned their respect. Jennifer has really excelled.”

(Rod Belcher is a Roanoke-based freelance writer.)