

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Perlla DeLuca – Founder, Southwest Constructors, The Pink Hardhat Foundation, Iowa School of Construction

Run Time: 20 minutes, 27 seconds

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

00:00:05 Katherine Lehtinen

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

00:00:45 Katherine Lehtinen

All right, Doug, we have another wonderful guest with us today and we share something very much in common. I believe our favorite color is pink.

00:00:54 Doug Buchan

You know what? Let me give you some words here, Katherine. Yeah. Passion. Yep. Inspirational.

00:00:59 Katherine Lehtinen

Yes.

00:01:00 Doug Buchan



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Okay. Nonprofit. Yep. knowledgeable. Unbelievable. What's all that spell if you put the first letters together? Pink, right? You know I was actually thinking about pink and I'm thinking you know what the village people had the song wrong when they said YMCA. Yeah. It should be P -I -N -K. Oh we're even getting you singing now. Look at that. I'm so excited about today. I couldn't find my pink shirt or I would have wore it.

00:01:25 Katherine Lehtinen

Oh my gosh I love everything about that Doug. Well welcome Perlla DeLuca, a Southwest Constructors Founder, as well as the Pink Hard Hat Foundation and Iowa School of Construction.

00:01:38 Perlla DeLuca

Yes, thank you guys. Thanks for having me. Thanks, Katherine. Thanks, Doug. And I'll make sure I'll send you a pink hard hat.

00:01:45 Katherine Lehtinen

Oh, yes, I would love. We actually have small collectibles here of things that have organizations we've talked to or books up on a ledge. So we would love to add that to our collection. So that's a great conversation starter. And one for Doug too, okay? so we can wear that one. I love it. Well, would you mind giving us a little bit about your career journey? Because it is truly fascinating. You've kind of done a lot of different things and would love to know how you've made the transition into where you are today from real estate, you know, to now a seasoned construction professional, and walk us through what that was like and how you got here.

00:02:25 Perlla DeLuca

Yeah, that's a that was a long journey doing this Give -and -take 24 years, right? So Even when I did real estate I was already doing construction too on the side So I started when I came from Brazil. I came straight to Florida and I start cleaning houses first. I work on restaurants, but then eventually I'm like I gotta get into construction because I was like it pays better, right? Mm -hmm. So I'm like, let me talk to some guys on site and see what I

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can do and then just started with like bathroom renovations at the time residential commercial and Did a lot of marble tile jobs and eventually got into county work On that process. I got my GC license years ago So in Florida, so I have a full -on GC license, which means I could have built a building, right? So it's so hard for women in construction. I always made sure that I took as much education as I could on my field. Just so when the guys come to me, I'm like, yeah.

00:03:39 Katherine Lehtinen

Yep,

00:03:42 Katherine Lehtinen

you knew it.

00:03:44 Perlla DeLuca

Yeah, so, and then one thing led to another after county work, I did some DOT work and then decide to move to Iowa about 10 years ago to do fatter work.

00:03:57 Katherine Lehtinen

Okay, I was gonna say, Florida to Iowa.

00:04:00 Perlla DeLuca

Yeah, the thing with construction in general, right? If you're a minority contractor or if you're a woman, that opportunity is not always there, right? Imagine me in Florida trying to do road work. It's such a tight, tight niche, right? Sure. So when the real estate starts slowing down, my project manager at the time said, there was just a flood in Cedar Rapids, do you wanna look into some flood work? I was like, let's do it. So we work on the flood, 2008, 2009. And then from there, we just, I don't know, Iowa just sucks you in and then you start liking the weather and then you love the people. And then before you know, 10 years, I'm here.

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00:04:46 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Oh my gosh, I love it.

00:04:49 **Perlla DeLuca**

Yeah, I love it. And then the journey has been amazing because people think you can jump into federal contracting and it's an easy process, but you do need to have enough experience to be able to make that transition. And so the last seven to eight years, that's all I do. I was able to do 26 federal contracts on the last few years. So I'm really like, I love doing the federal work. I always feel like for an immigrant, that's like the farther you can go in my career. So I'm really excited to be on the position I am today, but also to help women that wanted to get in.

00:05:29 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I mean, I'm just thinking you're doing all these federal contracts as well as your foundation and construction school. So how do you fit it all in?

00:05:39 **Doug Buchan**

I personally think she's a twin. Yeah, probably.

00:05:42 **Perlla DeLuca**

Yeah, she has a twin. That's what happens. I wish I had a twin. I'll get a lot more done. So, I mean, I don't stop, right? Like, I'm always ready, like, hours, weekends. I feel like when you own your business, what you're going to say, I'm not going to work Saturday morning. If an opportunity presents, you do it, right? So, the school has been on my mind for a while, since before COVID where we have a, you know, a labor shortage. But also I always bothered me over the years not to see enough women on our field and also not seeing that they are treated

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right in construction and things like that. So was always on the back of my mind, train more women, train more people for construction, but also bring awareness that has to be a safe environment for us as well, right?

00:06:36 Katherine Lehtinen

Sure. Yeah, for sure. Well, talk to me a little bit about, as a minority and women -owned small business owner in a very traditional male -dominated field, as you kind of just alluded to, and of not always feeling safe and secure, what are some of the significant challenges you've encountered? And how did you navigate through those obstacles to establish yourself as a successful leader and business owner?

00:06:59 Perlla DeLuca

I think that one of the biggest things for women, especially I always tell my girls at the school is that assumption that women cannot do it right that pre -assumption and so you gotta fight through that I fight it every day with engineers and inspectors and like you gotta show up and just be knowledgeable and be trained and then like you're always gonna encounter you know people that are gonna doubt you but you just gotta keep keep doing what you do I mean you're gonna make mistakes too you know we're just human but you just gotta keep pushing it through because you can't let like other people stop you from you know your goal. So for me has been has been very difficult especially in federal there is a lot of old -school people on the industry and they just like it's unbelievable we don't have enough time to talk about. Yeah, I'm sure we do. Doug always says, yeah, I was also gonna say Doug always

00:08:02 Katherine Lehtinen

talks about wanting to have an Odie Raw podcast. So maybe that'd be something that we can have over on the Odie Raw podcast at some point. So, so, you know, you bring up a good point,

00:08:12 Doug Buchan

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male dominated, you know, trades, professions in the world. Obviously, you're in one of those. and your students that you mentor, okay? And you teach them and you get ready to put them out there into the field. What type of support do they carry from you after the trainings are done and they get into the workforce? Do you help them to try to find mentors on individual companies? How do you work that process?

00:08:39 [Perlla DeLuca](#)

Yeah, that's for me is very important too. People always ask why they think the school is doing like different than other programs. I do think there's a comfort and the girls that come to my school that they can talk directly to me About those challenges just having somebody that face them every day on site And then I wouldn't even like we have an employer day because we have guys and girls I won't even like associate with an employer that is not on the direction that They are all -inclusive or they wanna you know, have a female crew so they will come here. Des Moines, they call like a, it's not a big town, so everybody knows each other. So I'm always checking on my girls how they are doing on site and if they're happy with the company, you know. So I always tell them, it's not that you, don't worry about what you don't know, just keep learning, keep showing up, you know, and don't let anybody disrespect you on site.

00:09:39 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

Good for you. Tell me a little bit about the Pink Heart Foundation and why did you found the foundation and what does it do?

00:09:48 [Perlla DeLuca](#)

So the foundation started even before the school, the only thing I didn't do a lot of advertise on it because I want to first to put this school through a couple of cohorts to show that we're not just talking about. It's very important, I feel there is a label in the industry that, oh, you know, she's wearing a pink a pink vest which is in the construction, you know, she went to the side and she took a picture. So I want to prove the opposite of that with the school first to lead by example and then put the foundation. So the foundation would just start advertising more. But the whole goal of the foundation is to accept donations for scholarship for the women.

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Okay, great for the women to be trained. So the foundation is specific specific for girls. The school is for everybody and so this school right now I got grants from the government for the first cohort and I got grants for the next few cohorts with the DOT. So our students don't pay to go to the school but the foundation is an additional

00:10:53 [Perlla DeLuca](#)

support to the women right. If they want to go into safety inspectors or if they want to do an additional certification so they can earn more money that's where the foundation comes in you know and takes care of the girls if they really if constructions is the direction they

00:11:12 [Katherine Lehtinen](#)

are gonna go. Sure tell me a little bit more about the Iowa School of Construction what is it made of what type of trades do you cover what does

00:11:21 [Perlla DeLuca](#)

that program look like? So when we designed the program me and my former partner Joe he has been in construction 30 years I'm in construction 24 years We were like, it came out of conversations that I have with other business owners, too, in Des Moines and in Florida, where we say, Oh, I wish when we're hiring somebody, they knew this. I wish when I'm hiring somebody, they had this certification. So basically, we put all that on a little package and design a program that is short enough. So if they come and they since they going on on Scholarship, they get the train and then after that they get placed on their job I mean we want to solve two issues one keep training for the for the trains, but to also the labor shortage So we're trying to connect that bridge Because hiring off the streets is hard to I heard a lot off the street and sometimes it will take a few months before that person get to the point where you know you would like to be as far as production and knowledge. So our school

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00:12:27 **Perlla DeLuca**

is a hundred percent hands-on and we teach the things we wish they knew.

00:12:35 **Katherine Lehtinen**

No better than though that someone who would be trying to hire them anyways for their own construction jobs then to know what are the things and the challenges you have to overcome.

00:12:44 **Perlla DeLuca**

Yes definitely and for us In safety super important. So most most trains do 10 hours. We start with 30, which is the most you can get Because on federal contracts you have to have 30 and then cpr So we we touch in a little bit of everything. We do not touch on the union trades So we don't do plumbing electric. I'm having an issue plumbing electric and uh, we also don't do carpentry. I mean, we touch on carpentry, but we, we rather stay away from the

00:13:19 **Katherine Lehtinen**

trade, the union. Then the union trades. Yep. Oh yeah. I understood. I mean, and there is so much in Iowa too, from just schools. And I know that the actual union there on plumbing and electrical is a pretty big union too, that I'm sure has all of their programs and

00:13:36 **Perlla DeLuca**

training through it as well. Yeah. We always make sure to let them know it's more like a pre-apprenticeship, it's a vocational program. You'll come here for 10 to 12 weeks and you'll figure out if something you even wanna do. But also, I like that we do a lot of equipment, like we bring a different piece of equipment every week. And obviously, if you decide to become a equipment operator, you're gonna need more hours, but at least you got the feeling of it.

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00:14:03 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, got exposure to it. That's part of it as well, just the pure exposure. So, encouraging more women and minorities to pursue careers in the trades is crucial for fostering diversity and innovation in the industry. What strategies have you found effective in promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities as you've been working through and in the construction world?

00:14:27 **Perlla DeLuca**

I think for me, branding has been important. The Pink Heart Foundation is pretty well known now. My goal is to go national with you know, but I think branding is important women wanted to relate They want to say I if she can do it I can do it, right? I do a lot of Public speaking just bring an awareness of the numbers, right? We only make 10 % of our workforce. So I think also a conversation that is very common is nobody knows how much you can make in construction, you know Sure, so there is a lot of money to be made if you decide to go into maybe you can do quality control or something Some of my employees don't call the control make \$60 an hour So the way I look at it why like a single mother shouldn't be can be doing that, too You know, so I I feel when I can do anything. I feel there's a lot of misinformation on the industry So my goal with the foundation with all the work I do like on the ground Talking to students. I go to a lot of high schools. I just did a Gerber camp for project

00:15:37 **Perlla DeLuca**

Iowa, it's just keep putting the word out there. I would love to five years from now Don't say it's a male - dominated word. Sure, you know industry anymore. Yeah

00:15:48 **Doug Buchan**

okay, so Katherine and I were always amazed by success stories okay now you yourself I mean I'll be honest with you very impressive okay I actually had to break a sweat while reading all of your achievements that you made in life okay but is there one memorable success story that you can share with us that you know you've helped someone reach their goals and beyond?

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00:16:16 **Perlla DeLuca**

There's a few different ones. There's one of my last students last year, every, every, that's the thing. Every little victory is a victory, right? So this girl, she came in, she couldn't do well with numbers and she would walk to school and I knew she was going through some difficult time on her life moving and, and she dropped all her gear on my desk and said I'm not doing this and then she walked away and I was like I call her I emailed her I said you walk away from this you're gonna walk away from anything on your life so now it's a decision now it's the time where I make the decision the person you're gonna be you know but I don't understand the numbers I said not everybody understand the numbers I told her I still don't know how to measure And she started laughing, I know how to manage myself. We're like, come back, stay on afternoons, we'll help you. And you know, you'll get through this. You know, it's 10 weeks, 12 weeks, you can do it. So she came back and she graduate and we were

00:17:17 **Perlla DeLuca**

really happy. That's awesome. So it's just like different things that you can do. I always feel, even when I had the real stage, if I can hire somebody, I prefer to hire somebody that doesn't have the training because that's a real opportunity, right? Somebody that you never look at for that person, for that position. I'm like, no, that's a chance that you have to really learn from scratch.

00:17:42 **Doug Buchan**

So it's like a fresh piece of clay and you're getting ready to mold it into something successful.

00:17:47 **Perlla DeLuca**

I mean, I love it. And I think most of it is like, a lot of the young generation don't have that. They don't have it at home. People don't realize, a lot of times when I speak, I didn't go to college, right? I didn't have the chance to go. I grew up poor in my country, I came here, I had to do all kinds of jobs, but that like didn't stop me. So I always try to tell my students because they're going through similar situations here sometimes. Yeah. You know,

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problems at home. So I tell them, don't let anybody judge you, just do you. You know, just keep pushing, keep learning. You know, if your friends are making fun of you because you're doing construction, they're not gonna laugh when you have a brand new truck. Yeah, that's true. So keep going. Yes,

00:18:32 Katherine Lehtinen

great. Especially during that time in the high school years, that's some of the hardest, most impressionable times that they're in their lives and trying to, you know, figure out their own identity as they go through it too. So it's wonderful.

00:18:44 Perlla DeLuca

Yeah, we try, I mean, sorry, we try to instill confidence, but also critical thinking, I think are two things we're missing. Yeah, for sure. Yeah, that's great.

00:18:55 Katherine Lehtinen

building on your experiences and expertise you know how do you envision the future of the construction industry evolving to become more welcoming and supportive to women and minorities you know it's one of those questions I always ask of like what does it look like 10 years down the road and what do you hope that it looks like 10 years down the road so I have it's not even my

00:19:15 Perlla DeLuca

vision when I watch I watch a lot of stuff that happens on UK and South America and to see a whole building being built by women, it's just the most amazing feeling. Whole projects. I'm not talking about one room, we're not decorating, when we're going to stop saying women just decorate. So I'm talking like drywall, concrete, that's my vision. I mean, it's going to take more than 10 years, but at least I think we're on the right direction. there is a movement, there is a change on the industry where it's becoming more acceptable, there is more training for women, so I think we're moving in the right direction.

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00:19:55 **Katherine Lehtinen**

That's awesome. Well, I want to thank you so much for one, the work that you're doing to not only bring highlight to the trades, but also to bring highlight to women and minorities, helping them understand that it's an opportunity for them to get involved in a career path and something that can really be life-changing for them. So thank you on behalf of Oatey for the work that you're doing. Thank you so much. Thanks for

00:20:20 **Perlla DeLuca**

having me and thanks for the work you guys do to spread the word.